AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル④〈下〉

佐山と新庄は、祖父の代に交わされた4th-Gとの「約束」を無事果たそうとするが、はたして4th-Gが秘めていた「約束」の真意とは何なのか!?

その一方で、ある書類により思わぬ方向に動きだした5th-Gとの全竜交渉の行方は!?

植物の世界4th-Gと、機竜の支配する世界5th-G。かつて佐山の姓を持つ者と4th-Gが交わした約束は全竜交渉に新たな答えと謎を与え、5th-Gは一つの決着を求めようとする。

それぞれが過去の想いを秘め、２つの世界を相手にした全竜交渉が、ここに完結する！

大好評AHEADシリーズ、第９弾！

か-5-24

AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル④〈下〉

川上 稔

電撃文庫
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か-5-24

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FORTH
AHEAD
EDGE
GENESIS
OBSTACLE
CITY

The 1st.AHEAD

かわかみ　みのる
川上　稔

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。ノート型PCを購入し、仕事環境がますます充実。でもこれでいつでもどこでも仕事ができる環境になった訳で、ますます休息が取れなくなったような……。

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935
エアリアルシティ
風水街都 香港〈上〉〈下〉
蠱楽都市OSAKA〈上〉〈下〉
閉鎖都市 巴里〈上〉〈下〉
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電詞都市DT〈上〉〈下〉

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉〈下〉
終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉〈下〉
終わりのクロニクル③〈上〉〈中〉〈下〉
終わりのクロニクル④〈上〉
終わりのクロニクル④〈下〉

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち。「最近、カレーと揚げ餃子のセットを食ったら体調崩しました。――でもまた食う」ハハハ仕事の妨げとしては愉快な理由ですな。

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.04

Characters

CHARACTER

02

Name: Odor/Roger

Class: American UCAT Temporary Inspectors

Faith: Amusing Companions

Name: Diana Zonburg

Class: German UCAT Inspector

Faith; Mother Cat

G-World

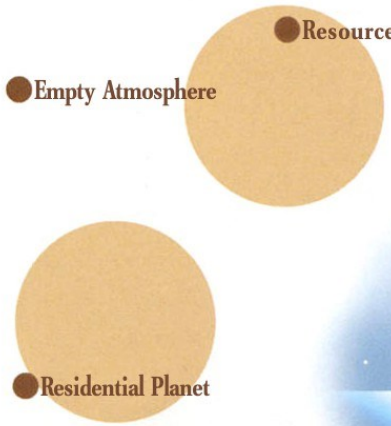
04

· About 5th-Gear ·

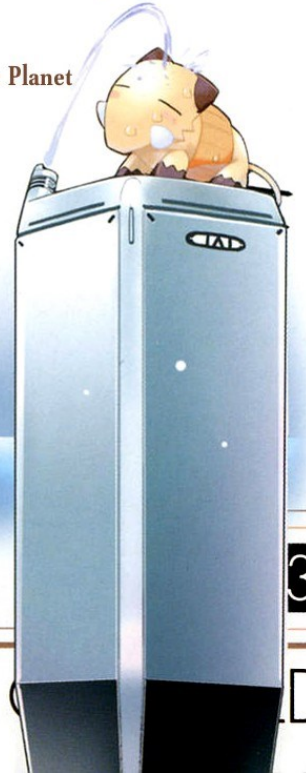
5th-Gear was originally a world of twin planets
in an atmosphere.
Its primary concept was that of "falling" and a civilization
that travelled between the two planets was soon created.
One of the planets was used as a resource planet
while the other was used as a residential planet,
but as the Concept War got under way,
the resource planet was armed as a defense base and the
residential planet was modified into a production base.

However, both planets were destroyed by
Black Sun, a mechanical dragon created by
5th-Gear and the people were wiped out.
It became a world of the scattered remains
of the planets.

· Name: Heo·Thunderson



· Name: Baku



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One of the planets was used as a resource planet while the other was used as a residential planet, but as the Concept War got under way, the resource planet was armed as a defense base and the residential planet was modified into a production base.

Top right: Resource Planet

Top left: Empty Atmosphere

Bottom right: Residential Planet

However, both planets were destroyed by Black Sun, a mechanical dragon created by 5th-Gear and the people were wiped out.

It became a world of the scattered remains of the planets.

Name: Baku

Name: Heo Thunderson

Eround Tea Ad

"The Secret Story Behind Eround Tea's Development"

Development Representative
Sayama Mikoto

I would often bring Shinjou-kun tea while she wrote her novel and this product is the result of developing a tea that matched her tastes.
In other words, this Eround Tea is what supports her body. I hate my own body for getting so excited when I say that, but let us call the crucial ingredient "Sayama Tea". But do not worry. The can says it has "nothing but leaves inside" and that is true.
When I would hand the teacup to Shinjou-kun, I would want to include something to express my feelings, but that is what a child would do.
An adult must take things to the next level.
And to begin down the path to that next level, how about drinking a cup of this tea?

Top left: For that eroundic person… Eround Tea

Top bubble:

I-it's coming!!

New!! Economical 1500cc can!

Bottom bubble:

There's a normal 350cc version too!!

Bottom:

"The Secret Story Behind Eround Tea's Development"

I would often bring Shinjou-kun tea while she wrote her novel and this product is the result of developing a tea that matched her tastes.

In other words, this Eround Tea is what supports her body. I hate my own body for getting so excited when I say that, but let us call the crucial ingredient "Sayama Tea". But do not worry. The can says it has "nothing but leaves inside" and that is true.

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Below picture: Development Representative – Sayama Mikoto

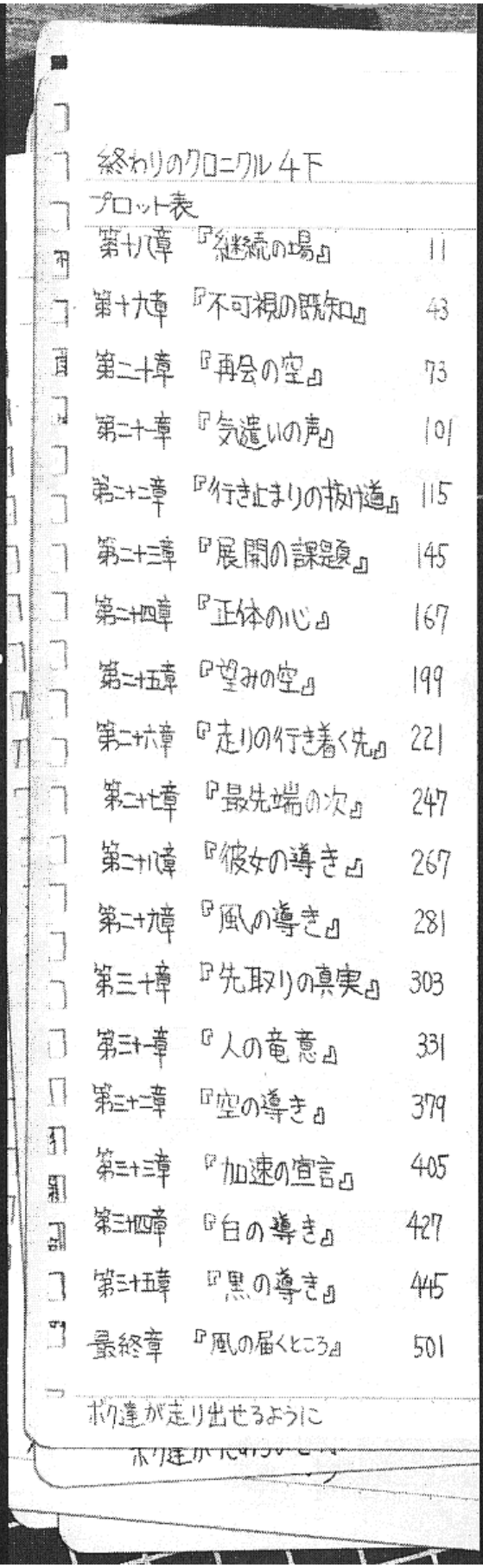
Title Page

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

4
【下】

—Everyone,
Let us approach.
The destination of happiness.



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イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

Chapter 18

“Place of Continuation”

The movement continues
In order to continue moving
As if to trouble them

Everyone,

Let us approach

The destination of happiness

Chapter 18: Place of Continuation

Chapter 18

“Place of Continuation”

The movement continues
In order to continue moving
As if to trouble them

The movement continues

In order to continue moving

As if to trouble them

Heo looked across a cluster of rectangular stones.

She found Japanese gravestones strange.

…In the US, they're a slate to engrave the person's name on or a symbol like a cross.

These only had the family name engraved in them and they were rectangular blocks with no religious symbolism.

She tilted her head while trying to figure out what meaning their shape had.

She looked around and saw quite a few of the gravestones. Beyond them were mountains, the sky, the sun peeking through the clouds, and the wind. It looked like there was no one else there.

"Ah."

But for an instant the gravestones in the afternoon light looked almost like statues.

She then realized that, even if the gravestones were not shaped like people, there truly were people sleeping below them.

…Is their vague shape supposed to help you imagine that?

She looked forward while thinking and found Harakawa had moved on ahead with a bucket in hand. She jogged to catch up while doing her best not to shake the flowers in her hands.

“Harakawa, is your family’s grave here too?”

“Yes, but it’s technically not *my* family’s grave. But what matters now is finding your family’s one.”

“Right.”

She looked around and quickly spotted a certain conspicuous grave.

“Harakawa, what’s with this bronze statue of a smiling man with his arms spread toward the heavens?”

“Oh, that. I don’t know the details, but it’s a famous gravestone here. All I know is that it says ‘Ooshiro’ at the bottom and there’s a slot for ten yen coins on the back of the head. From what I’ve heard, it plays Swan Lake or Tokyo Ondo when you put in a coin.”

“I see.” She nodded and noticed something odd about the large gravestone next to that one. “U-um, there’s a dirty magazine across from that one.”

“Yeah. I don’t know the details on that one either, but apparently that’s the grave for the family of IAI’s president. The employees and executives supposedly bring offerings every so often. I wonder if that moron of a student council president will end up like that.”

“That moron of a student council president?”

“Remember when those four morons showed up yesterday and I had to throw you in the closet? He’s one of them. Do you know what a student council president is, Heo Thunderson?”

“Yes. …It must be hard going to that school.”

“That’s for sure,” sighed Harakawa.

He faced forward again and began walking, but he did not forget to check the gravestones on either side as he did. Heo let out a warm breath while watching his back.

She checked the wristwatch her great-grandfather had given her and its analog display was past 2:00 PM.

…If great-grandfather is here, I'll have to say goodbye to Harakawa.

He had to know that as well, but he was searching for her father's resting place instead of worrying about it. While she watched him walk on ahead, she suddenly spoke.

"Um."

He stopped, turned around, and tilted his head.

"What is it, Heo Thunderson?"

She felt relieved that he called her name, but she realized she had not thought of anything to actually say.

She had simply spoken up in order to receive some kind of response, so she frantically continued.

"U-um, well, Harakawa."

She knew she had to say something, but something else happened just as she was about to come up with the words.

Something flew up from between the rows of gravestones to the left. The form she saw brought words to her mind and they spilled from her mouth as a voice.

"Th-there's a weird angel over there!"

"What?"

As Harakawa looked forward again, Heo saw it.

A girl with white wings of light on her back had flown up from between the rows of gravestones.

She did not know what was happening, but the winged girl flew by overhead and flipped around in the air.

Heo turned around just in time to see her forcefully land on top of the Izumo family gravestone. A sound of impact came from her right heel as it kicked against the top of the gravestone.

“Oh, whoops.”

She spoke in surprise as the base of the gravestone was partially ripped from the ground.

The large gray rectangle tilted as if raising a leg and it looked about to fall over.

But someone supported it from below: a well-built boy who ran out from the rows of gravestones.

“The student council president!?”

Heo looked more closely at the boy when she heard Harakawa shout from behind her. The large boy wore a school uniform and he supported the falling gravestone by using his left hand to swing the giant white sword against its stone side.

“All right! Nicely done! That was badass, V-Sw!”

The excess force smashed it to pieces.

With a deafening clear sound, the gravestone burst into a spray of stone fragments like it had been made of sand.

“Ah.”

The boy froze in surprise, looked down at his hands, and then back at the smashed gravestone.

“O-oh, crap! Now, I’ve-… Oh, wait. This was my family’s stone, so no harm do-… Oh, hey. A porn ma-… Are you okay, Chisato!?”

He went through four stages of processing his thoughts.

His final words had been directed at the winged girl who had lost her balance in midair.

The destruction of the gravestone she had landed on caused her feet to slip and she was about to fall onto her butt.

She let out a cry of surprise and frantically flailed her arms through the air.

The tip of the spear in her right hand circled around and cleanly decapitated the nearby bronze statue.

Heo saw the smiling head flying through the cloudy blue sky.

It flew in an arc and she did indeed see the coin slot on the back when it reached the zenith of that arc.

She then reached a conclusion, so she turned back toward Harakawa and swung her fists along with the flowers they held.

“H-Harakawa! I don’t understand what’s going on!”

“That means you’re normal, Heo Thunderson.”

The name he spoke brought a sound behind them.

The wings of light gave several powerful flaps to stabilize the girl and then the girl spoke.

“So she is Thunderson!?”

Heo sensed surprise and desire for confirmation in the girl’s voice, but then the sound of roasted beans popping came from the row of gravestones to the left. And the same sound repeated endlessly.

It was the student council president who reacted first.

“They’re seriously shooting!?”

Heo understood what that sound was, but the thought was refusing to enter her mind.

However, the next thing she heard was a great many footsteps and voices from the row of gravestones that was to her right now that she had turned around.

“Eliminate them! Eliminate them!!”

“Testament!!”

As she turned around, she saw men in blue outfits racing toward them.

They all held black metallic objects in their hands.

…What are those?

The answer would not come to her, but a shouted voice brought her to her senses.

“Harakawa! Take that girl and run away!! They’re after her!”

It came from the winged girl.

She immediately understood who “that girl” was, but…

…What does she mean they’re “after” me!?

She was reminded of the other night.

She and her great-grandfather had been pursued by something. Something that only her great-grandfather knew the identity of.

I can’t be, she thought just as she realized someone’s arm had wrapped around her left elbow and stomach.

It was Harakawa.

As he pulled her toward him, his head turned toward the boy and girl.

“This is all completely ridiculous, but I can trust the two of you, right!?”

“You idiot! Harakawa, someone who’s honest about their perversion isn’t gonna lie!”

“Um, Kaku? He said ‘the two of you’.”

The student council president smiled toward the winged girl next to him, turned back toward Harakawa, and cleared his throat.

“A-anyway, we’ll explain the details later, but I’ll tell you one thing now.”

He looked to the men in blue running toward them from the right.

“They seem to be fighting for freedom and justice, but they’re going to force those things on that girl! If you don’t want that, then hurry away from here! And to help you do that…”

He took in a breath and held up his sword. A metallic sound filled the air as it opened up and transformed.

“I’ll show you a little of what I’m made of!!”

At the same time, the white wings flew toward battle with spear in hand.

The battlefield spread out in an instant.

Kazami moved about among the gravestones.

Harakawa and Heo were escaping to the west while she and Izumo stopped American UCAT from pursuing them.

The enemy was numerous and they were divided between several of the long east to west rows of gravestones.

Kazami fought along those long, narrow paths.

Despite the gravestones dividers, she could switch between paths by flipping to the side with a flap of one wing. If they fired on her, she would escape to the neighboring path and fly down that one if she found defenseless enemies there.

Because they were lined up, she could sweep a path clean with a single blast of her weapon.

She repeatedly ran, tore into them, blew them away, and either evaded or leaped.

She was prioritizing Harakawa and Heo's escape over avoiding the enemy attacks.

That meant she was accepting some level of injury as long as she could push the enemy back.

And while repeatedly firing, she thought to herself.

…Why do we have to do this between allies!?

A bullet ricocheted off G-Sp2's cowling and grazed her cheek. If she had not been holding G-Sp2 so close, it would have directly hit her above the nose.

However, that had happened several times already. The most painful one was the shot through the side of her summer uniform's cardigan. Knit materials had to be thrown out if they got a hole and she felt a warm, tickling sensation underneath it.

She was bleeding and it was enough to begin accumulating at the bottom of her shirt that was tucked into her skirt. The defensive philosopher's stone Tsukuyomi had given her was emitting light nonstop and she would likely have been more badly injured without it.

終わりのセラフ

A man in a blue armored uniform charged out from behind a gravestone to the left, so she knocked him away by rotating up the tip of the spear from down and to the left. The sound of impact filled the air and she endured the recoil with the leg braced on the ground.

The spear uppercut sent the man three meters into the air.

But another armored uniform was already in front of her.

This new man was aiming a machinegun at her and her focused gaze saw the muzzle closing in on her in slow motion.

“Oh, what a pain!!”

She used all her strength to swing back down the raised spear tip.

It caught on the enemy soldier it had sent into the air and slammed him down onto the machinegun man before her.

They collided and it sounded more like shattering glass than a normal collision.

After using the recoil of the blow to leap backwards, she let out a breath, shook the sweat from her brow, and flapped her wings forward.

…Where did Izumo get off to? I think he went after Roger, but he isn’t making out in a dream again, is he?

He’ll be fine, she told herself as she landed.

She looked around and saw a man in a suit calmly step out from behind a gravestone on the right.

This was the man known as Colonel Odor.

When visiting those evacuated underground the day before, she had heard all about him. He was the one who had fought the mechanical dragon on top of that airplane two nights before, he was the one to attack Japanese UCAT the day before, he went by the name Odor, and he was America’s inspector.

…This is the guy who uses some kind of gravity technique.

She sensed how dangerous he was from the atmosphere around him and ignored the pain in her side.

Odor faced the girl before him while breathing heavily among the rows of stone.

“Are you…are you keeping me from going any further?”

“Looks like you understand the situation.”

She replied in English.

I see, he thought. *So the language of our homeland is understood even in this uncivilized land. Who was the evangelist that taught her? Long live the homeland.*

The girl raised her spear and he saw a red stain on the right side of her clothes.

At a glance, he identified it as blood.

The more time they spent facing each other like this, the greater her disadvantage due to blood loss.

The loss of blood would lower her strength and the blood trailing down her skin would bring fear and loss of concentration.

That meant his enemy would be destroyed if he merely waited.

Nevertheless, he moved forward.

“You aren’t going to wait it out like a coward?

“And give… And give my opponent an excuse? You could say you had lost too much blood to move, that it destroyed your concentration, or that it filled you with fear. And you could blame it all on me for waiting.”

He exposed his teeth in a smile.

“I will not… I will not give you such excuses. I will show you mercy without giving you a single excuse. I will have you give up by crushing you beyond question and rendering you unable to fight or even dead. …That is the kind of mercy I will show you.”

“Are America’s freedom and justice created with violence and fear?”

“Yes, yes they are. At least in my opinion, freedom and justice are no exceptions to the conservation of energy. If the people are to consume freedom and justice someone must earn it through the use of violence and fear.”

“Then how will you fill the world with justice and freedom?”

“That is simple,” replied Odor. “That is a simple matter. Before the people have fully consumed the accumulated freedom and justice, we will destroy the suppliers who are also the bearers of violence and fear. That way, the violence and fear will vanish and the people will protect and honor the remaining freedom and justice rather than consuming it!”

“Is that so?” The girl sank down as she spoke. “An idiot I know would probably have this to say about that: If you wish to fill the world with justice and freedom, tell the people to come defeat me.”

She was eight meters away.

She had wings and was too close for someone wielding a spear that doubled as a cannon.

He thought about why she would choose that distance.

“A surefire attack. You are making a surefire attack from close range, aren’t you?”

Odor raised his right hand toward the area above her head and snapped his fingers.

At the same time, wind exploded from her back.

“…!”

She flapped her wings, kicked off the ground with her left foot, and stayed low as she charged forward.

However, Odor’s power arrived in time.

A metallic sound reverberated through the air and the power attempted to drop down from above her head.

The metallic sound struck.

“!”

But Odor saw that his power had not hit the girl.

It had struck the ground in front of her and he saw the reason why.

Beyond the scattering sand, she had put a stop to her intense acceleration.

“Feints are easy to fall for, aren’t they?”

Her extreme acceleration had been stopped by a change in her stance.

With both her hands just above her chest, she held the spear to the left and right like the horizontal bar in gymnastics.

The white spear extending horizontally from her hands had hit the sides of the gravestones on either side of her.

“The stones. Did you stop yourself with the stones?”

“They’re not just stones. They’re gravestones. And they belong to people I can at least say wouldn’t take your side.”

The gravestones may have stopped her forward momentum, but they could not fully stop her inertia. With what sounded like a breath, the gravestones lifted up from their bases and slowly tilted.

“Oops.”

The girl rotated the spear around and pulled the tilted gravestones back from the other direction.

As soon as they landed back in place, she moved toward Odor as if collapsing forward.

The wings on her back were already raised in preparation to flap, so Odor reflexively snapped his right fingers.

“Break! Break and scatter in the wind!”

“That’s not gonna cut it!”

While running, she turned the tip of her spear toward the ground directly below herself.

She flew into the sky using her wings and the recoil of the blast that tore into the ground.

She jumped overhead with the same force as her forward run at almost the same moment that Odor’s metallic noise struck the ground.

She flipped around in midair and used her wings to flip upside-down while five meters above him.

“Let me tell you something. I saw you fight that black mechanical dragon, and the automaton you hit with a dragon cannon yesterday used her shared memory to tell us all how your technique works.”

Without moving, she held the spear tip down and toward him.

“When the mechanical dragon tried to circle above you the other night, you hit the airplane to shift its position. And when you had the dragon cannon fire on #8 yesterday, you tore into the blast by hitting the spatial ‘head’, didn’t you? For some reason, your attacks can only chop at your opponent’s head. To put it another way, you can only hit your opponent from directly above.”

The girl took aim toward his head, but…

“I won’t fire. That way I won’t give you any excuses. You could say you didn’t defeat me because I was out of reach, that you can’t be expected to defeat someone who can fly or against someone with a Concept Core, or that this was just a bad matchup. …Instead of those excuses, you’ll just have to accept that you lost to a girl and a doll.”

She descended. Her wings trembled and provided a powerful burst of energy as she charged downward.

Odor saw the spear tip before his eyes. As announced, it was closed and formed a blade rather than a cannon.

He raised his eyebrows, bared his teeth, and let out a laugh.

“Yes, yes. This is how you make things interesting!!”

In a split-second decision, he raised his right hand to shoulder height.

“!”

He snapped his fingers, but he did not strike the girl or the ground.

“The air. My odor can also tear into the air!”

The air to his right was crushed by the metallic-sounding strike. It was instantly compressed and slammed into the ground. The surrounding air flowed into the newly-created area of vacuum.

“…!”

He avoided the overhead attack by giving himself into that wind.

Due to her wings, the girl was also swept by that wind.

However…

“Now you can’t use your right arm.”

The girl forcefully stabbed her spear into the ground and stood up.

When he heard her, Odor looked at his right arm.

The rough wind washed across the right arm of his suit which was split open from cuff to elbow. The shirt below was similarly split and the bandage below that was ripped open.

Blood flowed down from between the arm and the bandage and he shook the arm to get rid of the blood.

He removed the bandage and released it to dance in the wind.

What was revealed below that thin cloth changed the girl’s expression. Her eyes opened wide, but she frowned.

“Those scars.”

His entire arm was covered in countless overlapping scars and swellings. It looked like someone had taken a chisel to his arm at random and the newly-made skin had grown to unparalleled thickness.

Odor looked down on the girl while blood flowed from the bulges and indentations of the scars.

“Interesting? Do you find this interesting? I was given these in childhood. There was oppression, pressure, and pain. There was also the sense of being unnecessary and being erased. Everyone referred to me as Odor rather than by my name. I was something no one wanted around. Something to be avoided.

Something that should crawl along the ground. And the feelings that gave me are what led that same type of power to choose me."

He took a breath and revealed a blue philosopher's stone anklet attached near his elbow.

"This is an odor. This is the odor of hostility. My odor carries hatred, disgust, and malice to reveal any hostility and crush it from above with my own hostility given physical form. It forces them down and prostrates them before me."

He then pulled his left hand from his pocket and spoke to the girl who had a look of disbelief.

"This is… This is my off hand, so I can't hold back."

He raised his left arm and the girl readied her spear.

With the sound of steel, the spear expanded. But the action pressed the spear's shaft against her side and a line of red trailed down her right leg.

Still, she continued facing him. With sweat on her pale face, she raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"If we're going to do this seriously, we don't need that insurance against excuses."

"Excellent. What an excellent spirit. On the same level as my wife."

She gave a quick laugh at that and immediately raised her wings.

But…

"…!?"

She stopped and so did Odor.

They ignored the fact that they were facing each other at lethally close range and they looked to the west.

That was the direction Heo Thunderson and that boy had escaped earlier, but a shimmering as if of heat was now visible in the sky there.

"…!?"

Heo ran.

She did not know where she was going, why she was running, or what to do.

She was in a strange land, caught in a battle between strangers, and someone said she was being targeted for some strange reason.

Why!? she thought. *Wasn't the only thing after me the demon that killed my mother?*

She did not understand anything. The only thing she was certain of was that absolutely everything around her was uncertain. Her panic and everything else made her feel dizzy.

She did belatedly realize that she had relied on that demon a surprising amount. The fact that it was targeting her was supposed to be the one thing she knew for sure.

…So why are these people after me too?

She ran and breathed, but inhaling was all she could manage. So much tension filled her heart that she could not release any kind of strength.

She could only let out small, withering breaths and her body grew heavy.

Realizing that only tensed her heart further.

This isn't right, she told herself. *I can normally run just fine.*

But that thought only invited more panic.

And just as she found herself unable to breathe, she heard more sounds of popping beans.

She finally realized what they were.

…*Gunshots.*

When that word appeared in her mind, her body shrank down even further.

She was trying to run, but her unmoving legs tangled together and she began to fall forward.

“!?”

Someone suddenly wrapped an arm around from the left side of her back to her right side.

Her lungs moved in shock more than as an attempt to breathe and she released a breath that sounded like a quick shriek.

“H-Harakawa!”

“Don’t slow down, Heo Thunderson. Get your feet on the ground.”

Only then did she realize he truly was lifting her in his arm. Her toes were barely scraping the ground, so she frantically placed the bottoms of her feet back down.

She felt unsteady for a moment, but she supported herself with his arm as she gathered her strength.

As she stood up, a breath leaked out and panicked sweat poured from her skin.

“I-I’m sorry, Harakawa.”

He did not respond. He merely removed his arm from her.

“…”

And he pushed on her back.

Ahead of her, the cemetery's main path sloped down to the west.

Finally, she heard his voice.

"Run, Heo Thunderson."

Hearing him speak while catching his breath, Heo took the first step forward.

But her feet slowed and the thought that was stopping her entered her mind.

…If I run here…

Wouldn't the person she left behind disappear?

That thought made her turn around, but the thought did not prove accurate.

Harakawa's back was right before her eyes.

His stood directly behind her in his school uniform.

She felt relieved by his presence.

But in that instant, his back suddenly collapsed toward her.

And beyond him, she saw the color blue.

It was one of the armored uniforms of the many people pursuing them. One of those people had run up and swung his rifle upwards.

Heo saw strength leave Harakawa's knees, but…

"!"

He forcibly swung his body around and slammed into the side of the man swinging the gun.

"…!"

The counterattack knocked the man to the right where he rolled along the ground. Harakawa stood up on unsteady legs.

“…”

And he turned toward Heo.

Their eyes met and his gaze forced hers back with almost audible strength.

“Hey.”

He bared his teeth and closed his eyes.

“I said run!!”

That shout was the most he could manage.

His knees gave out and his hips dropped as if from exhaustion.

That was when Heo realized she could move again.

And her first action was to open her mouth and use all the air in her lungs to carry out the contents of her heart that did not even amount to words.

It was a shout of rejection.

“…!!”

The girl’s crying voice rose into the sky.

A narrow west wind that almost seemed to be crying slowly blew down from the sky.

Inside that wind, Izumo simply kneaded empty air.

His large white sword was fallen next to him and he was asleep on his feet with a look of happiness on his face.

Roger faced him five meters away while frowning through his glasses.

“You certainly fell for that easily.”

They kneaded or stood on a cemetery path lit by the afternoon sun.

An afternoon wind from the west blew into the mountain peak cemetery and Roger stood upwind. That was perfect for his use of sand.

“You did not learn much of anything from last time.”

Roger relaxed his stance and raised his arms.

Both of his sleeves contained small cylindrical cases.

They were both empty and sand blew west to east along the cemetery path.

He looked ahead to the boy still kneading empty air.

“I must apologize, but I had already scattered the sand before you arrived. You likely fell asleep right when you were about to begin the fight.” He gave a bitter smile. “But I suppose you cannot hear me.”

…The dream sand’s effects last at least thirty minutes.

It was completely harmless, so it made a better means of stopping someone than a weapon that could actually do real harm.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Roger pushed up his glasses and looked at Izumo.

The boy was speaking in his sleep.

“C-c’mon, Chisato. We can’t do that here. Not officially anyway. This place is too blatant. We need to find somewhere that looks like we’re trying to hide but doesn’t actually hide us! …Hey, stop! Not that I’m complaining!”

Roger ignored his aggressively contradictory words, turned his back, and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“While that is a problem, it is not a problem to the objective at hand. The situation here is complete.”

He then shifted his thoughts to pursuing Heo Thunderson.

He was also interested in the boy who was with her.

…Is he from Japanese UCAT?

It was possible he was a civilian, so the men had been ordered not to fire.

But in the case he was more than that, it would be best not to leave this to the normal soldiers.

He took a step forward.

“I must-…”

He stopped before he could say “hurry”.

This was because he had noticed something reach his right shoulder.

It was a boy’s hand.

“…”

Roger turned his head toward the owner of that hand.

“Izumo Kaku.”

“I don’t care if guys know my name.”

Izumo tapped his own shoulder with the back of his giant white sword and the sword’s console displayed a comment.

“Your shoulders are stiff.”

“Well, this kind of battle is pretty boring.”

He yawned and Roger asked him a question.

“How did you leave the dream sand’s sleep so quickly?”

The effects of the philosopher’s stone sand extended beyond the sand itself. Merely touching the space they were flying about would put one to sleep.

The battle should have been over when they had faced each other and Roger had scattered the final sand in the wind.

…So why!?

“It’s simple. I have a certain special ability. …Whether standing or doing whatever else, I can instantly fall asleep with my eyes open.”

“You can’t mean…”

“That’s right. When I took my fighting stance and you thought I was about to attack, I’d already put myself to sleep.”

That brought a certain thought to Roger’s mind.

…Ahh, so he is an idiot.

But to confirm that he was, Roger asked a question.

“So that was all an act when you were groping the air earlier!?”

“That was obviously the quick dream I gave myself. Ha ha ha.

“Oh, I see. So you are always like that. Ha…ha ha ha ha.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!! Take that.”

That last comment was accompanied by an uppercut with the hilt of the sword.

The blow to his right side knocked Roger’s breath from him, but he managed to keep his knees from collapsing.

“…”

He forcibly braced his legs and tried to move away from Izumo, but then he noticed something.

A gust of wind had arrived from the western sky.

Harakawa felt wind surround him.

In his fading consciousness, he heard Heo’s cry and felt her clinging to him.

…You idiot. I told you to run.

However, he could not speak his thoughts aloud.

He could only move his arm around to the strength clinging to his back.

…If you don’t run, I’ll…

He turned to view her with his blurry vision, but he saw something strange behind her.

…The wind?

It was the same as what surrounded him, but this wind took form.

Something pushed the air out of the way to make its invisible presence known.

“A dragon?”

It was easily several dozen meters long, but it did not knock over any of the surrounding gravestones.

He assumed it was a ridiculous hallucination, but then it opened its windy maw toward him.

He saw the blowing wind of its invisible fangs and could tell it was charging toward him.

He shut his eyes.

…Oh, is this the demon Heo mentioned?

In an almost subconscious action, he held Heo in his arms.

And then his consciousness truly vanished.

Odor faced the wave of wind that pushed forward.

The girl standing before him faced to the west, the direction the wind had arrived from.

“————!!”

The wave of air shot out like an explosion.

The surging sound shook the ground and made the surrounding stones rattle. The wind raced across the area in an instant, descended to the base of the mountain, rustled through the trees, and blew away the flowers decorating the stones.

The scattering flower petals were plentiful enough to resemble snow and a single form came into view in the sky beyond them.

In the eastern sky, a white line of water vapor rose toward the heavens.

This was not a contrail from a jet engine. It was a line of cooling produced by pure speed.

It extended through the eastern sky and vanished.

“…!”

Odor lowered his left arm. He no longer viewed the girl before him as an obstacle, so he quickly walked westward where everyone else had gone.

He did not hide his wounded right hand or stop the bleeding and he ignored the sound of the girl turning toward him and raising her spear.

“Roger! Roger! Was that Black Sun!? Hurry up and capture it!!”

As his shouting voice travelled into the western sky, more wind blew in from that direction.

Meanwhile, three figures walked through a gentle wind in a forest too thick to see the sky.

The figure parting the tall underbrush in the lead was a six-legged creature made of plants.

The two people following him were Sayama in his suit and Shinjou in her safari coat.

As they walked, Shinjou looked up at the ceiling of trees and the slight bit of light seeping through.

“So this is the 4th-Gear reservation.”

“It feels more like an area of dense vegetation than a forest.”

She nodded in agreement and parted that vegetation as she walked.

Their destination was filled with humid air, thick underbrush, and trees.

However, the pathless path eventually ended.

While they followed the guiding plant creature and pushed through the vegetation, Shinjou gave a short voice of surprise.

“Ah.”

She quickly stepped up next to Sayama.

“There’s a lake up ahead, Sayama-kun.”

He looked forward where the forest opened up into a field of shorter undergrowth.

A lake of about one hundred meters across lay at the center of the field.

And the lake had a giant form in the center.

“Is that Tree Serpent Mukiti?” asked Sayama as he peered out from the forest.

A giant form of about three meters thick grew from the center of the lake and lay collapsed to the east.

It was a giant collapsed tree that’s top half had been cut away.

With the sunny clearing and lake behind him, the plant creature turned back toward the two humans.

He swayed happily and spoke.

“Promise.”

And…

“Mukiti is waiting.”

Chapter 19: An Invisible Known

Chapter 19

“An Invisible Known”

There is no question
There is no answer
There is simply what is natural

There is no question

There is no answer

There is simply what is natural

A grassy clearing about three hundred meters across was surrounded by forest.

A lake at the center filled about half the clearing and a large tree with the top cut off lay horizontally in the lake.

The tree was over thirty meters thick. The large trunk grew from the center of lake and bent ninety degrees to lie horizontally to the east.

The top surface that was cut like a stump was mossy and hard as a rock.

Two people were inside the shadow of that giant stump.

They were Sayama and Shinjou.

The plant creature acting as their guide stood between them as they sat on the east side of the lake.

The ground was not made of dirt. The surface had a muscular structure made from intertwined plant fibers. It had been buried beneath tall underbrush in the forest, but at the core of the reservation, they could now tell that absolutely everything was made of plants.

A few points on the ground were making breathing sounds and Sayama commented on them.

“It seems this plant earth is exhaling oxygen.”

Shinjou tilted her head where she sat to his left.

“The ground here is alive?”

“Indeed it is. Rather than simply producing oxygen from carbon dioxide via photosynthesis, their metabolism functions by absorbing any and all heart, cleaning it, and returning it. I do not know how much conservation of energy applies here or if it applies at all, but they mostly seem to feed by absorbing any heat that is causing some kind of burden, cleaning it, and returning it. This is a powerful sort of metabolism.”

The ground around them shook lightly.

A plant creature had stood up from the ground to their right.

The area of two tatami mats laid end to end had stood up. The creature was made from the fibrous mass that was the ground and it was about a meter tall.

However, its form quickly hanged. The fibers covering its green body came apart to form fur. That plant fur trembled and its body swelled up.

“Is it increasing its ability to radiate heat?”

As if to prove Sayama right, the large green creature blew air from its entire body.

The air smelled clean rather than of grass.

Once it was done, the plant creature flattened itself down and sank back into the ground.

Shinjou smiled when she saw its head as the creature lay down.

“The way its narrowing its eyes makes it look happy. I wonder if it really is.”

“This earth must be like a giant circulatory system for them. By gathering together and moving about, they produce exhaustion, consume that exhaustion, and expel a portion of it as waste like we just saw. That system must be hard to maintain with a small group, but with a group this large, their weight alone is enough to produce a fair bit of strain and they gain enough food to last them an eternity without doing a thing. Isn’t that right?”

He directed that last question toward the ground between himself and Shinjou.

The plant creature that had brought them here was half embedded in the ground and swaying back and forth.

It looked up at him to reply.

“Feels good.”

“What does? The atmosphere? The mood?”

“I think he is referring to this environment, Shinjou-kun.”

Sayama looked around and saw a new plant creature slowly rising behind Shinjou so it could absorb her exhaustion.

“Their bodies are mostly made of water, so a warm and humid area like this helps them gather heat and thus ‘feels good’. The room below UCAT had artificially created this environment, but this is natural. It must feel like arriving at a hot spring.”

“Do they see us as letting all our food leak out of us?” she asked with a quiet nod.

She bowed toward the creature behind her and leaned against it.

She then looked at the giant stump in front of them.

She looked up, across, and down before opening her mouth.

“It’s so big. But,” she added while still looking at the stump. “Mukiti isn’t moving even though we’ve waited a while.”

“True. But Shinjou-kun.” Sayama asked her a question. “Do you think this giant stump is Mukiti?”

The question made her tilt her head and wrap her arms around her knees.

“Is it not? He’s called a tree serpent, so isn’t he the biggest tree?”

“Then let me ask something.”

He turned to the plant creature instead.

“Are we being tested right now?”

“Mukiti is waiting.”

Shinjou tilted her head further and frowned.

“Hm? W-wait, Sayama-kun. What do you mean by tested? And what does he mean by waiting?”

She pointed her index finger toward the giant stump in front of her.

“Isn’t Mukiti that tree?”

“Sorry, Shinjou-kun,” said Sayama. “But probably not. It is true that giant stump is the most conspicuous object here.”

He asked a question to the plant creature behind her back.

“Is that Mukiti?”

“Not Mukiti. But Mukiti will speak.”

“Eh?” said Shinjou when she heard that.

She quickly looked up at the tree and turned around again.

“I-it isn’t!?”

“It would seem not.”

She was left speechless and Sayama nodded as if it had been obvious.

“Listen. That 4th-Gear resident told us Mukiti was waiting and this is the spot he brought us to. In that case, Mukiti must be here waiting for us.”

“B-but if he isn’t this tree, where is he?”

“There is only one answer: Mukiti is not here, and yet he is here. We have simply not noticed him even though he is right in front of us. However, he considers his presence here to be so natural that the possibility that we have not noticed has not occurred to him.”

“Mukiti is waiting,” repeated the creature.

“Yes, he is waiting. And as he waits, he must be wondering why we are ignoring him when he is right in front of us. And,” he continued. “When I asked this 4th-Gear fellow about that tree, he said Mukiti would speak. In other words…”

Sayama asked a question of the guide creature.

“Does Mukiti reside in that tree to speak through it?”

“Mukiti will speak. But Mukiti not here. But Mukiti is here.”

“I see.” Sayama nodded. “It seems Mukiti chooses to use this tree, but it is not Mukiti himself.”

“How can you speak with them when we seem so out of sync?”

She glared at him and he tilted his head as if to say not understanding was more confusing.

“When they speak, they do not include what they believe to be completely natural. This is no different than reading an instruction manual that has all the technical terms blotted out. You use the verbs and adjectives to speculate what technical terms were there and then you take guesses at filling in the gaps.”

“It sounds like some kind of quiz. But based on what they said, it does sound like this tree isn’t Mukiti.”

Shinjou glanced at the tree.

“But…”

She pointed at one part of the tree. The fallen portion was not broken or twisted; it formed a perfect curve.

“Bends in trees are usually more twisted than that, aren’t they? I wonder if it moved like a dragon in 4th-Gear. That would match my vision of Tree Serpent Mukiti.”

She held her knees between her arms and frowned while turning to Sayama.

“But if that tree isn’t Mukiti, what is?”

He gave an expressionless nod toward her puzzled look.

“The people of the other Gears likely had the same question during the Concept War. After all, 4th’s healing power would have been attractive. If 4th went with my grandfather instead of any other Gear…”

“It means the negotiators of the other Gears couldn’t find Mukiti?”

“Perhaps,” agreed Sayama. “Let us give this more thought, Shinjou-kun. They are used to waiting. And this is an answer even my grandfather found with no hint. That means even a monkey can figure this one out. …You try answering it in my stead.”

“Eh!? W-wait! Why me!? How am I supposed to know!?”

She cried out in protest, but Sayama had already stretched out next to the plant creature and folded his arms behind his head. He almost looked asleep.

“If you cannot find the answer, just speak up. I will give my own theory. But the answer is simple enough to find if you look at the whole of the situation, Shinjou-kun. The answer is already before you. Try to think of it as getting to know 4th-Gear a little better.”

“B-but why do I have to get to know them better?”

Her question was tinged with resignation, but he actually answered.

“Because of the promise.”

“Eh?” she replied.

However, he did elaborate.

He simply looked up into the sky, narrowed his eyes, and said something else.

“To be honest, I think the Leviathan Road with 4th-Gear will be more or less complete once we meet Mukiti.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If the purpose of the Leviathan Road is to clear away any malice left over from the Concept War, it has been half completed by bringing you here to complete the promise my grandfather could not keep. The other half is to meet with Mukiti and have him confirm the promise has been completed. But,” he continued. “Meeting Mukiti is the difficult part. This is the opposite of the normal pattern. Both sides have already given their demands, but we are having difficulty meeting their negotiator.”

“Yes, that is the exact opposite of normal,” said Shinjou with a frown. “But can I really replace the Shinjou they asked for?”

“That is for Mukiti to decide. At the very least, the 4th-Gear residents have accepted you as ‘Shinjou’.”

And…

“This is a test, Shinjou-kun. Mukiti is seeing if we are the same as the ‘Sayama’ he once spoke with. And most likely, the same goes for ‘Shinjou’. He is seeing if the ‘Shinjou’ that ‘Sayama’ promised to bring to meet him is really worth meeting. This is a test to gain 4th-Gear’s trust.”

Sayama re-crossed his legs and sharpened his gaze as he looked at the fallen stump in the lake.

“Shinjou-kun, find the identity of Mukiti who wishes to trust in you.”

He then looked up into the sky and closed his eyes.

Below the clear sky was a city. In that city was an arcade over a shopping district.

It was a broad arcade. The tiled path beneath was a pedestrian paradise and it led to the bus roundabout in front of the train station.

The sign on the arched entrance to the arcade said Hachioji Station Shopping District.

The trees lining the arcade still had green leaves, but some of the wooden table sets down below had brown autumn decorations.

A pair of girls walked through the people there to enjoy themselves. One wore a beige dress and a stole and the other wore a brown jacket and white slacks.

Shopping bags hung from their elbows and their arms were wrapped around some bottles and smaller paper bags.

“You bought an awful lot for just walking around and eating, Tatsumi,” said the girl in the jacket.

“True. Two sticks of grilled chicken, a stick of chicken meatballs, and two sticks of salted gizzards. And a One Cup.”

“You are going to gain weight.”

“Unlike you, Mikoku, I naturally don’t gain any weight.”

“I think we need to have a talk, so keep some time free.”

“Sure, sure. More importantly, what is that you bought?”

“A café vienna and a hotdog. The latter has spicy chili sauce.”

“You’re going to gain weight.”

“I ran plenty the night before last, so I can afford this.”

Mikoku adjusted her grip on the shopping bags as she spoke.

“What do you think, Tatsumi?”

“I…still think you’re going to gain weight. Just running isn’t enough.”

“That is not what I-… Well, that might be true, but I was referring to…”

“Team Leviathan has begun negotiations with 4th-Gear and will likely begin with 5th-Gear as well. The Army is interested in a short-term battle, so we do not need 4th-Gear’s healing power and we don’t need 5th-Gear’s technology when we already have Alex. …But you were asking what we would do next, weren’t you? If you’re that interested, why not ask Lord Hajji?”

Tatsumi adjusted the position of the shopping bags’ loops on her elbows and smiled. With that narrow-eyed smile, she took a sip from her cup and walked further and further through the arcade as if pulling Mikoku forward.

…What a difficult person to deal with.

Mikoku also adjusted the bags on her elbows and followed.

Shino was usually with her, but this time was different. Mikoku realized what it was like to follow someone taller than yourself and she imagined this was how Shino felt while following her.

“…”

“Are you thinking about Shino? Or are you curious where we’re headed? In the latter case, it’s entirely up to how I feel.”

“Are you just walking around randomly?”

“No, it’s based on how I feel. I might end up shopping partway through and I might continue walking the entire time.”

They left that pedestrian paradise on the southwest side and reached the intersection with National Route 16. Tatsumi looked into the distance along the arcade covering the walking path.

“This area used to look really exciting, but most everything has moved to Tachikawa now.”

“Yes. Tachikawa remodeling the area around the station into a multi-story pedestrian zone had a lot to do with it. Of course, this area is closer for us and it’s enough for the shopping we need.”

“Is that your comparative analysis of the two cities? You like comparing things, don’t you? Or do you prefer Hachioji because it’s recovered this much after being burned away by the fires of war? Tachikawa, on the other hand, was the city closest to the American troops after the war.”

Tatsumi smiled and her shoulders shook a little.

She set me up for that, thought Mikoku as she frowned and lined up next to Tatsumi.

She noticed the other girl had finished her two sticks of grilled chicken and Mikoku took a bite of her hotdog before asking a question.

“Tatsumi, what do you think about what happened to me the night before last?”

“As Thunderson said, you were right to escape. The giant presence there was probably from 5th-Gear, but you wouldn’t have been able to do anything.”

“Was I any use at all?”

“When Shino was driven back by a cicada, she didn’t ask that. Also, Lord Hajji said you did well, remember? And he isn’t the type to say that just because you are family.”

“You make it sound like you understand everything.”

“That’s because I’m satisfied with what I know. Unlike you who has to be sure of everything and yet decides things for herself without checking. You can’t know how this gizzard tastes from where you stand, can you?”

“Then let me have some.”

“No. I’ve already calculated out how much I’m going to eat.”

“Calculated out? You mean the calories?”

Tatsumi gave her a serious look and shook her head.

“No? I calculated out how much of my One Cup to drink after each stick I eat. I already said I don’t need to worry about calculating out the calories, remember?”

I am definitely going to have a talk with her at some point, swore Mikoku in her heart.

After Mikoku had consumed over half of her hotdog, Tatsumi took a sip of her drink and spoke.

“Anyway, you need to head out into battle more so you can see for yourself if what you are doing is right. You know we’re planning to attack UCAT before long, don’t you?”

“Yes, I have heard. …We will most likely attack toward the end of the year once the Army’s equipment is in order and our training is complete. Our goal will be…” She took a breath before continuing. “Taking the Concept Cores UCAT has gathered.”

“Yes. That will be the final battle between the Army and UCAT. It will come as a complete surprise for them, though.”

Tatsumi’s voice contained hint of a smile and that smiling voice did not end there.

“You don’t want Shino to take part in that battle, do you? That way you can hand everything over to her afterwards.”

"…"

"But she wants to help you. And that is exactly why you are so concerned about your performance the other night. You are worried that your inexperience will lead Lord Hajji to send out the two of you as a single team. Yet at the same time, you are treating her as too inexperienced to be a part of the plan."

"You are truly an unpleasant woman."

"Coming from another woman, that is a compliment. …At any rate, just remember that Shino is thinking about you too. Make sure you get along in the end, okay? That is why I'm teasing you."

"That's part of what makes you so unpleasant," said Mikoku.

Tatsumi smiled bitterly and ate the final meatball while holding the skewer horizontally.

"But don't worry. Even if we steal the weapon UCAT was given by 5th, it would be difficult to use given how many people the Army has available. Not to mention that Alex was made using 5th-Gear tech. …You understand what that means, don't you? We stole Typhon because we had no other way to obtain the technology, but mechanical dragon technology is different."

"That is thanks to your mother's research on 5th-Gear mechanical dragon wreckage, right?"

"Yes, and with the help of a certain person, she completed it. By having the pilot combine with it rather than riding in it, its reflexes reach the level of 5th-Gear's mechanical dragons."

Tatsumi began to add something more, but…

"…"

She stopped and closed her mouth, so Mikoku thought on the words she had swallowed.

…So the technology her mother left behind means we don't need to learn from 5th-Gear's hidden weapon.

Mikoku took a sip of her café vienna.

"In other words, the Army already has enough military might. It all comes down to training now."

"Mikoku, how can you say that with cream under your nose?"

She frantically wiped it off with her finger and stuck it in her mouth. She tasted the sweetness and heard Tatsumi laugh.

"You really are a child, Mikoku. Are you having misgivings about fighting? Has something like fear belatedly shown up? Listen. Lord Hajji does not intend to settle this entirely peacefully with all the Gears."

"…"

"It is UCAT's way of thinking that has messed everything up. Low-Gear claims to be gathering all the Gears to prevent the destruction of the world, but they secretly want to clear away the past and erase what they have done. However, they have not realized that, if their false show of good is allowed, then the opposite can also work."

"In other words, crushing Low-Gear will also gather all the Gears together and that will also avoid the destruction of the world?"

"Yes," said Tatsumi while looking to the side.

A shop selling women's suits was there and she pointed at a blue suit in the window's show lounge, but Mikoku waved a hand side to side in refusal. It was too expensive.

The two of them then walked on.

"What the Army needs is a narrow but deep military force that can destroy Team Leviathan and UCAT just once and wake all of them up. We are not UCAT, so

we do not need a broad and shallow military force that will advocate peace and govern all of the Gears."

"But will the other Gears really accept it if we destroy UCAT?"

"That is why you're worried about Shino, isn't it? Once the Concept Cores are stolen from UCAT, you intend to fully disarm the Army and leave everything to Shino and her concept of mutual understanding. …And you likely intend to leave her once that happens. How very cool of you."

She snickered along with that last line and the smile remained as she continued.

"Well , either way, I think all the other Gears will end up obeying the Army once they hear the reason behind our justice."

"The reason behind our justice, hm?"

"That's right." Tatsumi nodded. "No matter how hard Low-Gear tries, there is nothing they can do about that."

Tatsumi finished eating one skewer of gizzard.

"You will be sent on another mission soon. As will I."

"Yes, a mission that you can barely call a mission: monitoring the Leviathan Road."

"Their negotiator is probably negotiating with 4th-Gear right about now. That can't be easy."

"It can't be easy?"

"That's right," said Tatsumi. "Lord Hajji once told me about it. During the Concept War, 9th-Gear and the other Gears were unable to gain the cooperation of Tree Serpent Mukiti, Concept Core of 4th-Gear. No matter how many times they visited, Mukiti would speak but not show his form. And when they tried to forcibly extract the Concept Core…"

“Yes?”

“He never showed up again and the readings were too weak to tell where he was.”

“He vanished? No, he went into hiding? Then what is Mukiti?”

“I don’t know. That is something only Sayama Kaoru knows as he was the one to bring 4th-Gear to Low-Gear. But…I have a feeling his descendent and that descendant’s companions will know before long.” She gave a bitter smile. “And if they do find the answer, it will make things all the more fun when we steal the Cores.”

Tatsumi audibly gulped down the rest of her drink and gave a satisfied sigh.

“Oh, dear. I got so worked up that I drank the rest of it. Do you want the leftover stick of gizzard?”

A giant tree lay collapsed in a lake surrounded by other trees.

Shinjou stood before that giant tree.

“Where is Mukiti?”

She muttered that question to herself and looked around the area.

“…”

She saw the many trees of the forest, the ceiling of branches and leaves supported by that forest, and the waves of underbrush beneath.

Before her was a lake with plants at the bottom, a giant tree, and the sky.

…But where is Mukiti in all this?

She looked into the forest, but there was no sign of anyone there.

She began to think. For the moment, she decided to think of Mukiti as an invisible being.

She sat on the ground to help herself calm down and she looked at the large tree.

The top was pointed toward her and the end was rough as if it had broken off, but the break itself looked fresh. It was dirty and mossy from the rain and wind, but it had none of the corroded holes common in large trees. She could see the many tree rings crammed in along that surface.

…In other words…

"Does that mean Mukiti doesn't even go inside it?"

If it had a hole inside, Mukiti could have entered the tree to move here, but she could guess at its internal density based on what she could see.

"He wouldn't be able to go inside. Mukiti is outside. …But then where is he?"

Her question received no answer. She wondered if he was holed up deep belowground in the core of this ocean of plants, but that did not meet the requirement of him also being here.

Mukiti had to be anywhere and yet nowhere.

And unless she found him, they could not speak with him.

Earlier, Sayama had speculated that the other Gears had been unable to negotiate with 4th-Gear.

That might be true, she told herself.

Anyone who saw that giant tree move would assume it was Mukiti and it seemed he had chosen to use the tree when interacting with others. In that case, he would have looked like a literal tree serpent.

…But what if he isn't?

Her eyebrows gathered together as she held her knees and rested her chin on them.

Something was then placed on her back.

She turned toward the faint scratching ticklishness and found a plant creature had lifted itself up. It had risen sideways and was leaning up against her.

It's a lot like a dog, she thought with a bitter laugh.

She found comfort in that and switched over her train of thought.

"Sayama-kun, your grandfather found the answer without any hints, didn't he?"

"No, think about it more carefully, Shinjou-kun. It scares me to think of that old ape finding the answer without a hint. Thinking back, I wonder if someone else from the National Defense Department gave him an idea that acted as a hint. Or maybe there was a cheat sheet in 4th-Gear that told him the identity of Mukiti! That's it! There just had to be!!"

Shinjou ignored the boy's thoughtless refusal to lose, but she did think there must have been a hint.

4th-Gear would have had this same sea of plants and the plant creatures. It would also have had the giant tree that spoke for Mukiti, but that was just a deception.

Why had Sayama's grandfather not fallen for that deception?

"…"

Shinjou removed her backpack.

It contained the case for the lunch she had eaten on the way, a towel, and a folded umbrella. It also held her precious binder and the copied documents Kashima had given them.

She pulled out those documents and opened them. There was still a lot she could not read, but she could read the National Defense Department investigation report on 4th-Gear.

She skimmed through it and found a certain passage.

…On March 15, 1938, they took in a moving plant found in the mountains of Kyushu.

“Shinjou Kaname reported that the plant’s movements grew more active as it approached the ley line modification facility. He proved a low level of communication was possible.”

Shinjou looked quickly through the reports on the other Gears.

After the destruction of some of the ley line modification facilities, the National Defense Department had discovered the existence of foreign beings. That had been on August 4, 1937 when Hiba Ryuutetsu and Siegfried had fought.

…Once they realized beings from another world existed, a lost individual of these beasts arrived.

“They first entered 4th-Gear on January 10, 1943.”

They had lacked the technology to open a gate, so Sayama’s grandfather and the others had been unable to do anything more than speak with the plant creature for over five years.

…But that means they continued speaking with the creature without ever seeing the giant tree.

If someone with gate technology visited 4th-Gear, they would hear Mukiti’s words through the tree.

But what if someone lacked that ability?

“So that’s it. He had been speaking with the creature for so long without the preconception of the tree.”

She closed the documents and turned to the plant creature supporting her back.

“Excuse me.”

She asked a question while wondering what it had been like back then.

“What happens when you are separated from Mukiti?”

“Mukiti is here. Mukiti not here.”

“You mean…”

She trailed off and smiled bitterly.

….Just like Sayama-kun, I’m imagining what the creature is trying to say.

But she continued speaking with that bitter smile filling her voice.

“You mean Mukiti is still with you even when you leave him?”

“Mukiti is here. Mukiti not here.”

The answer was the same. That meant it did not change.

They were always both with and not with Mukiti.

What did that mean?

She thought and a sudden memory came to her. And that memory led her to the answer.

While he lay with his eyes closed, Sayama heard Shinjou speak.

“Sayama-kun, do you have a moment?”

He shot to his feet, loosened his tie, and spread his arms.

“Indeed I do!! …Why are you glaring at me and scooting away, Shinjou-kun?”

“I’m just wondering if I could word my questions a little better.”

Her expression then changed. Her eyebrows grew flat and she gave him a peaceful look.

“Sayama-kun, you said it is impossible to communicate with plants, didn’t you?”

“You mean that business about attaching electrodes? I did say that. What about it?”

“Um, about that. …Why electrodes?”

“Living things produce a faint amount of electricity. That fact was likely used to give the theory a sense of credibility.”

Shinjou let out a breath when she heard that.

Her shoulders lowered in relief and she looked back at him.

“But,” she said. “That’s a human way of thinking about it, right? These creatures have no brains and their level of life seems comparable to ours.”

She stood up and the plant creature stretched its body toward her as if to pursue. However…

“Sorry. You can do that later.”

She removed her shoes and then her socks.

…And next the safari coat and skirt.

Sayama waited with arms spread, but Shinjou walked to the lake and turned back with a forced smile.

“Ha ha. Sayama-kun? Were you expecting something that was clearly not going to happen?”

“Heh heh heh. I see being a tease is your specialty, Shinjou-kun.”

“Oh, c’mon, Sayama-kun. Being completely crazy is your specialty.”

She returned to a serious expression and turned away.

Is she being shy? wondered Sayama. *But that is wonderful too.*

He looked to the spot she had left. The plant creature seemed interested in her shoes and socks because it was rolling them around and wrapping its front arms around them.

Could it be? thought Sayama just before slowly picking up her shoes and socks and pressing them to his face

“Sniff sniff sniff!!”

“Wh-what in the world are you doing, Sayama-kun!?”

“It seems every hint of exhaustion was absorbed. They are odorless.”

He saw the creature expel some oxygen, so he quickly crouched down and inhaled.

“This is the oxygen produced from your right foot’s middle toe!”

“No, it isn’t!! Well, maybe it is, but it doesn’t matter!”

“Heh heh heh. A man with a discerning nose can tell, Shinjou-kun.”

“Yes, yes, yes. But, y’know what? I’d rather you didn’t turn into a dog. …Are you even listening?”

That question was followed by a splashing sound.

終わりのクロニクル

He turned around while holding the plant creature that had expelled her oxygen and found her with her feet in the lake.

The water was shallow and she spun around with the water only reaching her ankles.

The bottom of her safari coat flew up and her hair swayed about.

She lightly kicked the water with right foot and smiled.

“I think plants might have their own way of communicating.”

“Are you saying they have a unique form of communication that provides a connection to Mukiti no matter where they are?”

“Yes. But that still leaves a question: why can 4th-Gear’s residents speak with people like us who aren’t plants?”

She lowered her leg and bent back to look up at the giant tree behind her.

“I think Mukiti is inside this tree right now.”

“But there is clearly no gap for him to enter.”

“There is. It’s just so incredibly small that we can’t see it. And this provides the link that allows us to communicate with 4th-Gear’s residents.”

She spread her arms as if to embrace the tree while keeping her back to it.

“It’s water.”

Shinjou lowered her gaze with her arms still spread.

She looked down at the lake’s surface where she was reflected in the water.

“It is everywhere in 4th-Gear and yet nowhere. It is in all of 4th-Gear’s residents and yet in none of them. And it has no set form but becomes a serpent when residing in that tree. In other words…”

She turned around with a smile and found Sayama sniffing at the air expelled by the plant creature he held.

“Are you even trying to listen?”

“My apologizes, Shinjou-kun. …But look to your right.”

She did so and saw water.

Water spiraled up to her height.

It looked like a double helix serpent, but there must have been water flow within the pillar because it produced spray that almost looked like horns or scales.

“A dragon.”

The water serpent lowered its head at her words as if nodding.

It then raised its head and did not stop there.

“!”

It burst into a great spray of water.

But despite her surprise, Shinjou continued observing what occurred before her.

The scattering spray did not touch her. It formed a spiral in the air and flew through the sky like a mist. And…

“The tree.”

As the mist vanished, the large tree behind her began to move.

It produced many deep groaning sounds and formed waves in the lake.

It rose.

The rising tree pushed up the air and the forest cried out.

The shadow of the giant tree extended and Shinjou heard a pulsation. That was the pulse produced by the tree coming to life. With each pulse, the old water that had soaked inside the tree was expelled from the stump-like top that had already become the head.

She heard a sound much like a steam whistle, but no one responded to it. The plant creatures did not rise up and the trees of the forest did not make any more noise than necessary.

…Mukiti is here, yet not here.

Mukiti was likely merged with all of the moisture in 4th-Gear. He existed everywhere so he could manage and control the entire Gear.

…Is he like a swarm of liquid nanomachines?

A warm breeze circled the clearing and the large tree pulled itself fully upright.

She heard a voice. It was Mukiti's voice. It was a distinct voice that could be taken as masculine or feminine.

"Hello, everyone."

She found herself unable to immediately react to the sudden greeting.

After a moment, the voice spoke again.

"Let us try that again."

"H-hello!!"

She frantically shouted back a greeting, and the tree shook a bit as if nodding.

"I am Mukiti."

Another pause.

“Nice to meet you.”

Chapter 20: Sky of Reunion

Chapter 20

“Sky of Reunion”

Can we meet again?
Is it more likely to happen if I wish for it?

Can we meet again?

Is it more likely to happen if I wish for it?

The afternoon sun covered an area of land.

That land was surrounded by a fence except for the east side which was the back of a large house.

It was a backyard. As it was situated to the west, the sun reached it best during the afternoon.

The land contained trees, large garden stones, and a small pond.

Also, a small shrine was located next to the pond.

But this shrine did not have a torii or a hanging lantern. It was as tall as a human and simply existed as proof of something. The years had worn down its dark surface and its small tile roof was stained with moss.

A woman in a blue kimono currently stood in front of that shrine.

She was sweeping up the early fallen leaves with a bamboo broom and looking at the shrine through her glasses.

She then heard a voice from the bath window on the house behind her.

“Sister, have you put out the offering?”

“Yes, I did that at midday, Kouji. If you have something else to give, I’ll take it.”

“Are you sure you want to eat something filled with preservatives?”

“A-are you trying to kill your sister!?”

An arm with rolled up sleeves and a hose stuck out the window and sprayed water around.

“Wah! Stop it, Kouji. I’ll tell the young master that you were trying to spray your liquid all over me!”

“Please stop saying such dangerous things so naturally.”

Kouji poked his head out the window with a towel around his forehead and a deck brush over his shoulder.

“And I’m sure you’re thinking of gathering those leaves to cook potatoes over a bonfire for the first time this year, but please stop. The leaves that fall this early are too wet too burn. They’ll just make a lot of smoke and get the firefighters called in.”

“What are you talking about? Just leave it to your sister. I have an evidence-destroying torch from one of our clients and the potatoes are good ones from Kyushu.”

Water shot out and struck the gathered pile of leaves.

“Ahh! Kouji!? I’ll get mad if you keep destroying my dreams!”

She did not hesitate to pull out a cigarette-sized torch, light it, and throw it into the bath window.

She heard her brother cry out from the bath and saw a blue flash of light.

“Honestly. I was only trying to be with the young master and Setsu-chan in spirit while they’re in Kyushu.”

“The young master would not set his own house on fire! Oh, no. It scorched the painting of Mount Fuji on the wall and made a really ominous image.”

“Now it’s an image post-eruption and what’s wrong with that? …Also, Kouji.”

“What?” replied her brother along with the sound of him scrubbing the wall.

She ignored the sound and looked back at the shrine. As the sun was about ready to begin setting, she peered into the small structure.

“When the young master went to live in the dorms, our father and Honorable Sayama told us where this shrine came from, but will we tell the young master once he graduates?”

“Honorable Sayama said he regretted never telling Asagi-san, but I do wonder if it’s right for us to do it in his stead.”

“I’m sure it is. It’s better than having the young master know nothing like with Asagi-san.”

After a pause, Kouji spoke again.

“Um, sister. …Why do you think Honorable Sayama didn’t tell Asagi-san about his past?”

“Oh? You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I see, I see. If you ask me to tell you and give me a Japanese-style, super-sweet dessert that’s still below 150 Calories with dinner tonight, I might consider telling you.”

“What’s this? Have you gotten fat as a pig again? Were you the culprit who threw the scale into the pond?”

“I-I have not gotten fat! I don’t get fat!”

“Enough excuses. Just tell me.”

“Well, if you insist. …It’s simple. Honorable Sayama didn’t want Asagi-san to be like him and Asagi-san was intent on the same thing.”

Ryouko wrapped her right arm around the broom and looked up in the pale sky as she spoke.

“I still remember when Asagi-san and Yume-san were called in to work that night. Honorable Sayama stopped them out front and told them something, but…”

“Don’t tell me you were eavesdropping on them.”

“I couldn’t hear what he said,” she complained while pouting her lips. She then lowered her gaze to the ground. “A big car came to get the two of them and I’m not sure if Honorable Sayama’s final words reached them. I put the young master to sleep and waited at the front door, so I did hear what he said just as the car pulled away. He said he would tell them everything once they returned.”

Kouji asked a question while scrubbing the wall.

“Did the young master hear that?”

“I don’t know. But only Yume-san returned and then she passed away. A lot happened between me and the young master and he was truly left alone once Honorable Sayama passed away, but now…”

She lowered her head and let out a bitter laugh of resignation.

“I’m sure he’ll search it out on his own even if we don’t tell him. So while I’d like to tell him what I know about this shrine and about Asagi-san…it probably isn’t necessary.”

She looked back up and saw the road and other residences past the fence.

However, there was one odd fact about the row of houses: there was a single empty lot among them.

Despite the houses being crammed in so closely, there was still an empty lot along that main road. It was blocked off from the road by barbed wire and stakes, the three sides that bordered houses had concrete block walls, and it was filled with tall grass.

Ryouko frowned at that empty lot.

“I’m sure he will eventually learn that what he needs to know is what Asagi-san and Yume-san kept hidden and did not tell us.”

While she put on a show of looking to the west, she heard Kouji’s voice from the bath.

“Sister, I’m sure he and Setsu-kun will do what they need to do. But are you listening?”

“What is it, Kouji? I’ve got a really good pose going on here. Don’t interrupt me.”

“Sure, sure.” He stuck a hand out the window with the palm up. “Pay for the repairs. These scorch marks aren’t coming off.”

She smiled and threw another torch through the window.

Shinjou and Sayama sat on the edge of the lake with their shoes off.

In the forest, they were speaking with Mukiti who had entered the giant tree. They began by discussing the current situation and Mukiti had begun turning the conversation toward Sayama’s grandfather.

To Shinjou’s right, Sayama had his pants rolled up and his feet in the water. A plant creature supported him from behind like a chair back and a creature under the water supported his feet.

“I never would have dreamed of receiving a foot massage in a place like this, Shinjou-kun.”

“Sayama-kun, how can you relax like that?”

She gently held his left hand because Mukiti was talking about his grandfather, but it seemed the 4th-Gear creatures’ healing ability was reducing the pain his chest.

Once the conversation reached a break, the sweat had left his forehead.

Thank goodness, she thought as the air moved and the tree asked a question.

“How far did I get?”

“You said Sayama-kun’s grandfather visited and gave you lots of information on Low-Gear.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mukiti. “So in terms of the Sayama here, that was the previous previous Sayama.”

“Yes. …And, um?”

She looked at Sayama and saw him closing his eyes and enjoying the foot massage now that the chest pains had receded. His lips twisted up into a fearless smile.

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, this is very nice. How about we bring one to the bath next time?”

It did not seem he was going to be of any help, so she looked back at the tree.

“Um, Sayama-kun asked earlier, but what is the promise? And why was Shinjou Kaname involved in the promise to go with his grandfather?”

“Are you curious?”

“I am.”

“So am I. I am curious what kind of person he was.”

Mukiti gently bent his body as he spoke.

“According to the previous previous Sayama, he was Tenkyou’s companion.”

“Yes. He was his assistant.”

“He said Tenkyou created some kind of gathering.”

“Yes. That would be the National Defense Department.”

“He said Tenkyou was researching something.”

She just about said that was the Concept War, but she hesitated.

…Huh?

Sayama’s grandfather had visited 4th-Gear in 1943. By that time, the National Defense Department had already created gates and Kinugasa Tenkyou should have learned the truth of the Concept War from Rhea and Xolotl 3.

Am I misunderstanding something here? she wondered.

“What was Professor Tenkyou researching?”

As expected, she received a response.

“Something to end concepts.”

“…Eh?”

Before she had finished uttering that tone of confusion, she noticed Sayama move next to her.

He folded his hands on top of his stomach.

“And what was that?” he asked.

“I do not know.”

The answer was frank and the residents of this Gear did not lie.

Shinjou heard Sayama sigh, but he went on to ask another question.

“Did my grandfather tell you anything else about Professor Tenkyou?”

“He lived in a place like this called ‘the mountains’ and that place was near the gathering. That is all.”

Sayama suddenly sat up and stared directly at the tree rather than at Shinjou.

“Do you mean Professor Tenkyou lived in the mountains near the National Defense Department and he was developing a weapon that would ‘end concepts’?”

“That is all I was told about anything related to Shinjou.”

“I see.”

Sayama relaxed and had returned to his usual expressionless look by the time he turned to Shinjou and nodded.

“So the promise itself is the only other related piece of information?”

“Yes. The promise.”

Mukiti gently shook his body. A thick, slow wind blew by and the trees shook as he formed words.

“The promise was for us to continue on in this world.”

When she heard those words that sent waves across the lake, Shinjou lifted her hips a bit and began to stand up.

“I am here. I have been accepted as the Shinjou of the promise. But…”

Her eyebrows lowered and she tilted her head.

“What was the promise? What was the promise that had you follow Sayama Kaoru here?”

The large tree began by uttering a single word.

“The promise.”

And…

“The previous previous Sayama called it the dragon’s promise.”

Shinjou recalled the term Leviathan Road that referred to what they were doing right now.

“Nice to meet you.”

She fully stood up as he gave a second greeting. She kicked the water of the lake and turned toward Sayama.

However, he was not looking at the tree. He was looking at the edge of the lake to his right.

Baku was there with his front legs raised.

A moment later, the past enveloped them.

Shinjou stood in some woods.

She was not on a mountain. This was a flat area of woods on top of a hill. She stood on a broad, unpaved gravel road near the top of the hill and brown puddles remained here and there on the road.

All of the trees on either side of the road were thick cedars and the afternoon sunlight reached her through the conifer leaves.

…Is this in Akigawa? It reminds me of the mountains and forests around there.

She could hear cicadas.

She recognized the unique cry of the large brown cicada and realized the temperature was quite high.

As she focused on the cicada cries, she looked into the distance to the right.

She could see the ceiling of tree leaves continuing down the hill and she could see the buildings of a city beyond that. However, there was a thin layer of smoke rising from those buildings.

And it was not the smoke of rice cooking at midday.

…There was an air raid here.

She realized this was a continuation of the past that Baku had shown them at the hotel that morning.

She hesitated, but then…

"…!"

She reflexively ran down the road. She had her mind step forward and hurry over the puddles.

She soon found a blue truck up ahead.

It was the one belonging to Sayama's grandfather.

Past the truck were a wooden gate, a Buddhist temple, and then the forest.

This was the temple that evacuees had been brought to.

Shinjou passed by the truck and found the black tile roofed gate standing open.

She passed through and found the fifteen square meter temple grounds.

She saw a bell tower to the left, the main building and lodgings up ahead, and a storage building to the right.

The main building had all of its doors open and there were several dozen people inside.

Most of them were wearing white pajamas and lying on futons. Some were young, some were old, some were sick, and some were injured. An old man in a white coat and a female nurse were rushing back and forth between them all.

Shinjou also heard a voice. It belonged to Sayama's grandfather.

"Excuse me. Where is Shinjou!? Where is Shinjou Kaname-kun!?"

The man producing the voice stood below the main building's overhanging roof.

It was indeed Sayama's grandfather and he wore a military uniform.

Shinjou Kaname is here, realized Shinjou.

But she stared intently at Sayama's grandfather's back. She wanted to see Shinjou Kaname, but…

…So does he.

She stopped her mind behind the man.

She was still five meters away, but that was as close as she could bear to go.

From that distance, she saw movement in the shadowy hall of the main building.

The people lying down began sitting up to see who was speaking.

The nurse turned around and walked over.

She picked up some documents from the floor and opened one as she arrived under the overhanging roof.

"Shinjou Kaname, was it? That name is on the list, but please try to remain quiet."

"My apologies. Can I meet him?"

The nurse hesitated for a moment. "Where is he?" she muttered under her breath while turning toward the people behind her.

At the same time, a hand rose near the wall.

"…"

It was a pale and slender hand.

However, it was not a man's hand.

It was a woman's.

…Eh?

Shinjou heard a voice, but it was a child crying rather than an adult speaking.

"A baby?"

She saw Sayama's grandfather look over and frown.

"Who is that?"

"She gave birth this morning after arriving at the temple. I do not think she can speak quite yet."

"Wait," said the woman in the futon by the wall.

With a rustling sound, the thin futon moved as the woman tried to sit up.

The nurse frantically stood, brushed her skirt into place, and walked over.

Sayama's grandfather walked over as well. A great many gazes gathered on him, but he walked straight through that dimly-lit hall.

It took him exactly ten steps to reach the woman by the wall.

The nurse helped the slender woman sit up, placed a few cushions behind her to prop her up, and placed the red-skinned baby in her arms.

The woman saw that Sayama's grandfather was a soldier and used a hand to fix her hair and collar.

"Excuse me, soldier."

"What is it?"

However, the woman asked a question. And a surprising one at that.

"Was Shinjou-sama all right?"

As that voice joined the cicada cries, Shinjou felt a chill.

However, the back wearing a military uniform did not budge in the slightest.

Shinjou asked a question to that back before her eyes. She was almost asking him to check on what she did not want to.

“A-aren’t you going to ask what she means?”

But her words did not reach him and only the cicada cries filled the air.

It was only after a few breaths that Sayama’s grandfather spoke slowly.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well,” said the woman who the nurse supported. “The other night, I was waiting for the evacuation truck during the air raid. And then this child…”

“Did you go into labor?”

The woman lowered her head and blushed, but her eyebrows lowered.

“And then one man got off the truck to leave space for me. He said he would wait for the next one and he said his name was Shinjou. …Shinjou Kaname.”

“…”

“If he is safe, I would like to thank him for my sake and for my child’s-…”

She frowned and gulped a bit when she saw the look on Sayama’s grandfather’s face that Shinjou could not see.

“How is Shinjou-sama?”

Sayama’s grandfather did not respond.

The woman tilted her head, the nurse lowered her head, and one of the cicada cries vanished, but he still did not respond.

Eventually, the woman asked another question with a tremble in her voice.

“You are…Sayama-sama, aren’t you?”

He did not reply. He did not move at all. As if to tell him to move and to fight the silence, the woman spoke some more.

“When he stepped out of the truck, Shinjou-sama said to rely on someone named Sayama if I needed anything. He smiled as he said it.”

Nevertheless, Sayama’s grandfather remained silent.

However, his shoulders rose as he took in a deep breath, let it out, and asked a gentle question.

“What is your name?”

The woman nodded and then bowed deeply toward the man with her child in her arms.

“I am Tamiya Ryou.”

Shinjou’s mind gasped at the surname and the past suddenly switched over.

Sayama saw the past switch over.

…Where am I now?

His mind awoke as if looking up and he saw a certain scene.

He saw the edge of a lake. The bottom surface was made of plants and it was surrounded by a forest.

It was much like the 4th-Gear reservation, so he wondered something.

“Have I woken from the past?”

No, his mind answered.

Without even a close examination, there were several differences.

First of all, there was no giant stump in front of him. Also…

"The sky."

A black expanse covered everything above.

This was not the night sky. It was a black sky and that was all.

There were no stars and the only light was the powerful one from overhead.

That light was the sun.

He looked up at the intense sunlight coming from directly above.

As he did, he noticed something odd.

Directly ahead, something like a path extended up from the forest and into the sky.

It was a green belt.

The green path rose into the sky and had collections of what resembled blue veins in places. As he looked further up, the green belt drew an upward arc as if it would circle around behind the sun.

There actually a few similar belts. There were three of them in all, including the one Sayama was looking at. And those belts formed complete circles.

…A world of three rings with the sun at the center.

This was 4th-Gear.

The three rings each had a diameter as wide as the earth's orbit around the sun and the ecosystem was gathered on the inward edge. They slowly rotated and mist-like smoke rose from them where they crossed paths.

…Are they exchanging their ecosystems?

He looked up at the world of three rotating belts for a while.

"…"

But then he lowered his gaze because there was something else he had to see here.

The direction he was meant to look was straight ahead.

He saw something there that had not been present before.

Mist hovered over the lake and someone sat in the grass in front of the lake.

The person wore a brown suit.

It was his grandfather.

The wind blew gently past the man. It was a warm but transparent wind.

It produced small waves on the lake, shook the plants, and rustled the leaves of the forest.

Nevertheless, the mist over the lake did not move.

His grandfather sat cross-legged while half-sinking into the grass. His hair blew around a bit as if the wind had knocked it out of place and a plant creature grew up next to him.

However, the creature did not actively approach. It only looked at the man.

…He has yet to make any promises with 4th-Gear.

While still facing the mist, Sayama's grandfather held his right hand out toward the creature.

The creature looked to the mist, but finally approached and held the offered hand in its front legs.

In an instant, the creature expanded.

“Lots.”

Air blasted from the creature’s body and more joined it. The ground swelled up as if linked to the creature’s backside and a new creature was added behind it.

But the additional creature was forced to instantly expel air and another was added on.

The creatures quickly surrounded the lake and extended into the forest.

The forest stirred and Sayama looked up.

He saw a rapid change in the ring of land extending upwards in the distance.

It had been primarily green a moment earlier, but it was turning blue.

That blue quickly enveloped the one ring and the mist whirled at the intersections with the other rings.

Wind was created.

Air was produced from all over the ring. A burden from outside their world should have been an impossibility and the excess air produced wind.

Sayama heard a voice from the mist in front of him.

“It appears some adjustments are needed to deal with your production rate.”

“Yes. Humans create a good deal more heat than plants. Either way, I suppose this counts as our first interaction.”

With that, his grandfather removed his hand from the plant creature. Reluctant to part with him, the creature reached out, but the man continued pulling away his hand.

“Sorry.”

He faced forward and spoke to the mist.

“I can no longer bring Shinjou.”

Sayama gasped at how plainly he said it.

He was only a few meters from his grandfather’s back, but he did not approach.

…I must not.

With the word “self-control” in mind, he watched over his grandfather. He did, however, have his mind sit down in the grass.

He simply set his vision’s height to the same as the back before him.

“Shinjou will not be coming?” asked the mist.

“Correct. Even though I promised he would. And even though you said you could return with me if you could heal him and use that to fuel your survival.”

“I remember. I decided to listen to what you had to say because you found me.”

“Finding you was easy. After all, I had longed to meet you without having seen you.”

“But you were the first to suddenly call out to the sky and ground as soon as you arrived here. Do you remember?” asked Mukiti’s will. “You kept saying ‘nice to meet you’ and suddenly started talking to the sky and the ground. I could not ignore that.”

“You asked why I was doing that and I said it was because I knew where you were. After all, I only wanted to speak with you. I spoke to the sky and the ground because that was you,” said Sayama’s grandfather. “You asked me to keep it a secret because the other Gears might try to forcibly extract you if they knew. And that’s why I asked you to come to our Gear.”

“Using the term you taught me, that is a ‘funny’ story.”

“It is,” said his grandfather while looking up into the sun in the black sky. “Nostalgic too. It feels like that discussion was only yesterday. …When you learned how our world did things, you asked to hold an equal position with no debts if you were to go there. That was when I realized your healing ability could give you that. And you asked for the person most in need of healing so you could earn my trust. That way you could prove your power was sufficient and you were not underestimating our demands.”

“But Shinjou will not be coming?”

“No. I’m sorry about that. My promise with you can’t be fulfilled. …And I can’t bring someone who I can’t trust and you wouldn’t want to heal someone who I don’t trust. 4th-Gear now has no way to determine whether Low-Gear can repay you or not.”

“You broke the promise.”

“That’s right,” sighed the man. “Because Shinjou is no more.”

The wind blew through as if to erase his words. It came from the ring of land turning blue up above.

“Ah,” sighed Sayama’s grandfather in the wind. “You might actually be incredibly cruel. In our world, we say he ascended into the sky, but in this world, all of the burden I had left on him is turned to wind.”

“Sayama.”

“What is it?”

“I see people can make water too.”

With that, Sayama looked at his grandfather’s back. The man finally wiped at his face with his right hand.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“Let us go to your world,” said Mukiti almost immediately.

“…”

In the past, Sayama’s grandfather forcefully raised his head.

Mukiti had agreed to what the man had wanted. However…

“You fool!” He rose up and shouted. “Will you mock our negotiation!? Low-Gear and 4th-Gear negotiated as equals, but my clumsiness prevented us from completing those negotiations! That is the result! Twisting that result will not just damage Low-Gear’s honor but 4th-Gear’s as well!”

“The negotiations are not over.”

Mukiti’s words silenced the man and more wind blew.

However, this was not the same gentle wind as before. It was a mighty gust.

The air moved all at once as an audible wall.

“…”

It came from in front. The branches and leaves of the forest and the sea of grass all fell forward as if being tanned and released all their moisture into the air as mist.

A white mist danced through the sky.

It spiraled upwards and did not stop there.

It stretched out as it rose into the black space.

In response, mist rose from all three rings of land.

Sayama and his grandfather both stood up and looked around.

“I am here, yet not here,” said the sky.

The mist spiraled around the sun floating in the center of the rings.

“You said my response when you found me is called ‘surprise’.”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with ignoring the conclusion of our negotiation?”

“Is there only one Shinjou?”

Sayama realized what Mukiti was trying to say.

Because he always had Shinjou by his side, he understood.

“It seems your world has a concept of inheritance.”

“…”

“Let us keep the promise. Sayama, even if you are inherited by someone else, I can trust you. Bring Shinjou to me and I will show you my power.”

“But Low-Gear needs to win the Concept War for that to happen.”

“We have promised,” insisted the voice.

Sayama saw his grandfather stop moving at that.

The man stood tall within the grass that was blowing in the wind.

His shoulders slowly rose, he took in a breath, and he did not back down.

He tightly clenched his fists, gathered strength in his neck, and looked up into the sky.

“Are you saying you will continue the negotiation? With me…and with Shinjou?”

“We have promised.”

Sayama’s grandfather thought for a moment and finally spoke.

“Then come to keep that promise. Come to keep the dragon’s promise. To ensure our negotiation, I will first destroy this world and to take responsibility…” he declared. “I will make sure you meet Shinjou. When the time comes, the surname Sayama will bring the one known as Shinjou to see you. When the world once more desires a negotiation of battle and powerful healing is once more needed, Shinjou will be brought to you as the condition for gaining your power. And to do that, I will make sure all the other worlds are-…”

He took a breath.

“To keep my promise, I say that the surname Sayama indicates a villain.”

“Yes,” said the dragon taking form overhead.

It was a dragon formed from the gathered mist.

Plant creatures then grew at Sayama’s grandfather’s feet and the three rings rapidly faded in color. The world changed from green, to yellow, and finally to brown.

“Are you gathering the ecosystem information!?”

“The large whole is being becoming a small whole.”

Mukiti lowered as he said that.

The sky grew even darker as the sun lost its light behind Mukiti who lowered his long body straight down.

Everything except for the lake was wrapped in darkness.

A gate, realized Sayama as something rose beyond the lake.

It was a giant tree. Its trunk was over thirty meters wide and it broke off its own top as it rose.

Mukiti flew inside the broken end and 4th-Gear moved.

But just before it did, Sayama heard Mukiti's will.

"Sayama, you said I was 'surprised' when you found me, didn't you?"

"Yes. But why do you bring it up now?"

"I would like you to revise that description. To use the term you taught me, I was 'happy' that someone had found me."

"…"

"And I wish 'happiness' to those who will inherit the promise."

That signaled the end and a wind from above enveloped Mukiti and collided with the tree.

A moment later, all light vanished.

Sayama thought in that darkness.

…A negotiation to make dragon and human equal, hm?

That was the promise. And to restart that promise and give it a new beginning, the dragon was to meet Shinjou.

Was this why Shinjou-kun was given a spot in Team Leviathan? wondered Sayama. *My grandfather and the old man would have known about this, after all.*

…If so, those old men must truly love roundabout methods and riddles.

He thought about what Shinjou was doing now. The previous vision of the past had likely been a great shock to her, so he decided he needed to support her.

And as his mind fell, he recalled his grandfather's back that he could no longer see.

The back he had seen at the Hachioji temple had been a new sight for him, but the one he had seen during the promise with Mukiti had not.

…That was the same back I saw until he died.

Chapter 21: Voice of Concern

Chapter 21

“Voice of Concern”

To show concern is to express your feelings
Without any regard to whether that is a good thing or not

To show concern is to express your feelings

Without any regard to whether that is a good thing or not

The setting sun covered a forest, a lake, and a large tree.

This was the 4th-Gear reservation.

Everything remained the same except for the color of the sky.

The blue from earlier in the day was now dyed with the scarlet of evening.

The large tree's shadow stretched outward and covered two figures.

Those figures were Sayama and Shinjou who stood on the edge of the lake.

Having just been shown the past, Sayama held his chest and Shinjou leaned up against him and placed her own hand on his chest.

"Are you okay, Sayama-kun?"

"Yes, I will manage. More importantly, are you okay, Shinjou-kun? After what we learned about Shinjou Kaname, that is."

"Yes."

She nodded and looked to him.

He faced her with a serious expression and his right hand opened in a groping pose.

"…What is that hand for?"

"You cannot tell? I have decided I need to calm your heart."

"I think you just drove out every bit of calm that was left in my heart!"

She lowered her shoulders in a sigh which transformed into a release from all the tension of worrying about what she had seen in the past.

…Was he trying to help me like that?

As she thought, he opened his mouth, took a deep breath, and spoke.

“Now, Shinjou-kun. As Kazami said last night, we should visit IAI headquarters.”

“To follow Shinjou Kaname? But he died, so…”

“Remember what Doctor Chao said? They received a New Year’s card saying his child was doing well. If he passed away, that card was likely sent by his wife. In that case, we might find records concerning that child if Kaname’s employee record is stored at IAI headquarters.”

“Oh.” Her eyes opened wide and she nodded. “The surname Shinjou would have been passed down.”

“Correct. Everything is inherited by the next generation. Isn’t that right, Mukiti-kun?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and faced the large tree collapsed in the center of the lake.

After a pause, the tree spoke.

“Yes. Because that happens, the inherited promise with Sayama was fulfilled.”

Shinjou nodded and realized her face likely contained a mix between a smile and a troubled expression.

“Excuse me.”

She hesitated for a moment.

After seeing the past, how was she supposed to express what was in her heart?

The loss of Shinjou Kaname had been a shock, but the conversation between Sayama's grandfather and Mukiti had been the exact opposite.

…His grandfather is a lot like him.

They were not related by blood and they had different faces and attitudes, but something about them was similar.

…Both Mukiti and I have been influenced by a "Sayama", so we should be able to reach some kind of understanding.

She had seen Mukiti's power when he had taken away her exhaustion, but she also believed there was something else they had in common.

And so she honestly spoke the words in her heart.

"That moment in the past meant a lot to you, so you've been waiting all this time, haven't you?"

"Yes."

Shinjou continued while realizing these were the words she had wanted someone to tell her when she had been alone.

"Then it's time to stop waiting. The people you wished for and trusted in have arrived." She took a breath. "We are equals, so let's use what power we have to show concern for each other."

"Indeed."

Mukiti replied with a determined affirmation.

"The Concept War has finally ended for 4th-Gear."

And…

"Sayama, there is a new fight, isn't there? Just as promised."

Shinjou turned toward Sayama and saw him nod.

He crossed his arms, looked around, and took in a breath.

“Indeed there is.”

“And you need my power for that fight, don’t you?”

“Yes. That includes the power of your Concept Core, your healing power, and whatever other powers you might have.”

“I see. Then I have a request for this new fight,” said Mukiti. “Continue to pass down everything so it is inherited.”

Because…

“That way, we can remain with you.”

Shinjou thought on his words.

…He’s asking us to preserve this world.

They were to clear away any problems, discord, and obstacles so that nothing was ever gone even if it was lost. That way, it could all remain with 4th-Gear and its near-infinite life.

But…

“That’s just what we want, right, Sayama-kun? That’s the objective of the Leviathan Road.”

She and Sayama faced Mukiti’s tree and spoke a single word in unison.

“Testament.”

So…

“Let us go, Mukiti-kun. Come with us.”

As soon as Sayama said that, Shinjou realized a certain color had appeared in the sky.

No, it was not the sky. It was at the very top of the tall stump.

A small flower had bloomed.

It was a white flower on a branch that jutted out.

“Then let us go,” replied Mukiti.

…Mukiti doesn’t say what is already known.

Shinjou watched as the small flower and its branch fell from the stump.

At the same time, the world’s colors began to fade.

“Ah.”

She quickly stood up and the wind carried the flower to her head.

The flower then spoke in Mukiti’s voice.

“Let us go.”

The forest and clearing rapidly lost their color.

Green turned to yellowish-green and then to yellow. The trees began to lean as if sleeping and the underbrush sank down as if lying down to sleep.

As the plants fell asleep, their movement produced a wind that indicated the end of the reservation.

“My Concept War is over.”

Mukiti’s will spoke just as the sun began to sink behind the horizon.

The fading color filled the ocean beyond the slowly collapsing forest.

Finally, everything was dyed in shadowy colors and the tones of night.

…They will follow us.

They would follow Sayama because Shinjou had come to meet them.

"…"

Shinjou silently stuck the flower's branch into her hair.

She turned toward Sayama and he spoke expressionlessly.

"That looks good on you, Shinjou-kun."

"Thank you."

One green creature stood next to him.

Baku sat on the head of that creature which had likely gathered the reservation's ecosystem information. As they also had Mukiti inside the flower…

"4th-Gear will gather in Okutama UCAT, won't it?"

"Yes, but we must visit IAI headquarters in Shimane first."

Sayama looked up into the yellow sky of the sunset.

"The American UCAT force at Okutama is a problem. We currently have nowhere to return to."

Harakawa noticed color before his eyes.

The pale yellow light of the setting sun filled his vision.

…This is the sky.

He realized that was what he was seeing.

He could easily see this by lying down in a large open area, but his subconscious was sending him warning signals. Something was not right.

…Where am I?

When he tried to remember what had happened, he arrived at his memories of the Nishitama Cemetery. A group in strange blue armored uniforms had pursued them and he had been struck while trying to let Heo escape.

That's pretty pathetic, he told himself.

…So is this the cemetery?

Cirrus clouds were flowing east through the sky and the sunlight was coming from the west.

While looking up into the sky, he realized three other things.

First, he was lying on sand.

Second, he could hear water splashing across that sand.

And third, someone was lying on top of him.

To check on all three of those things, he sat up.

He was not in the cemetery.

He was on a beach.

The ocean was only ten meters away.

And the person lying on top of him was…

"Heo."

Her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow.

He could feel her body heat through her clothes and that told him she was definitely alive.

He breathed a sigh of relief that she was safe, but then he remembered something. Just before he had passed out, he had seen a mass of wind before him.

“A demon, hm?”

He spoke the word she had mentioned and gently held her in his arms.

She let out a quiet groan and spoke in her sleep.

“Great-grandfather.”

He nodded and relaxed his shoulders.

“It’s okay.”

His words took the tension from her eyebrows.

He waited for her breathing to calm down and then he looked around the area.

The beach was surrounded by rocky areas and the rocky area behind him had been worn down into an embankment with pine trees growing beyond it.

Based on the direction of the setting sun and the size of the waves, he drew a conclusion about the ocean before him.

“Is that the Pacific?”

He guessed they were in Chiba or somewhere close. He would often go to the beach while touring with the automobile club and this beach was a lot like the one in Kujukuri he had visited over summer break.

Hiba had stayed home from that trip because he had been worried about his girlfriend who lived with him. On the way back, they had fired all their leftover fireworks into Hiba’s room, but that had caused something inside to explode. It was still a mystery what that stupid underclassman had been doing in his room.

While nodding at that unnecessary memory, Harakawa looked to Heo in his arms.

"…"

He returned his expression to normal and stepped on the sand to stand up amid the sounds of waves.

Heo was light in his arms.

She really is a girl, he thought while also realizing he had no sand in his shoes or pants cuffs. Heo was the same, so it almost seemed like they had descended here from the sky.

He then belatedly realized something else.

"This means we moved from the cemetery."

The change in the color of the sky meant it had not happened instantaneously. It had taken some amount of time for them to move here.

"Or were we carried?"

That begged the question of "by whom?"

…Was it the student council members or the group in blue that they were fighting?

Or if it had been the demon's doing…

"Why would the demon leave Heo unharmed, take me with her, and abandon us here?"

He walked as he muttered his question. The sand below his feet formed a slope and his footsteps produced a sound much like a squeaking mouse. That sound continued as he climbed the sandy slope.

The pine trees beyond the embankment grew closer.

He saw a rusty railing beneath those trees, so there had to be stairs down from there. Based on the number of pine branches he saw, he guessed the area beyond was a forest.

As light as Heo was, he still began breathing more heavily while carrying her up the unstable sand.

He hurried on while deciding to take a break once he reached the embankment at the top.

The salty wind pushed at his back and…

"Made it."

He arrived at the top of the embankment.

Beyond that embankment was a gentle stone staircase meant to fill the ten meter height difference and a small pine forest grew on either side.

At the bottom of the stone steps was a road leading through the pine trees.

He saw some vehicles parked on the narrow road. The green vehicles were familiar to him.

"Four-ton trucks of the US military."

Three of those trucks filled the road down below and a group of people stood around the trucks, in the forest, and below the steps.

And they all wore blue armored uniforms.

"Kh."

Just as the sight made him move, the wave of blue parted and two men stepped forward.

One was a slender elderly man in a gray suit and the other was a young man wearing glasses and a brown suit. It was obvious neither was Japanese.

The elderly man pulled his right hand from his pocket and looked up at Harakawa.

His gaze could only be described as “sharp”.

“That girl. I am the one charged with protecting that girl.”

Harakawa frowned at that and was unsure how to react.

“Wait just a moment.”

He began with that to make sure he still had strength in his voice.

“This girl is going to a place called UCAT with her great-grandfather.”

“We are that UCAT.”

The man in glasses spoke up quickly as if to gain Harakawa’s trust.

He then pulled a document from his pocket.

“This was written by her great-grandfather, Mr. Richard Thunderson.”

The man looked up at Harakawa through his glasses and he was not smiling.

“As her great-grandfather has passed away, we intend to protect her from now on. If you have no objection, we would like to take her in as soon as possible.”

All of the men in blue armored uniforms prepared for a possible fight as the man asked a question.

“Will that be okay?”

Chapter 22: Dead End Escape Path

Chapter 22

“Dead End Escape Path”

The path you know leads out of imprisonment
But your body has yet to step into its entrance
People call that a dead end

The path you know leads out of imprisonment

But your body has yet to step into its entrance

People call that a dead end

An apartment sat below the dark sky.

It had an old, beige exterior.

Two people watched a black vehicle drive away from it.

The two of them were in a small park across the road and two buildings east of the apartment building. Standing below a chestnut tree in that park were a boy and a girl carrying a large cloth bag.

The girl wore a white track suit with the name Kazami sewn on the chest.

She watched the closed green steel door on the eastern end of the apartment's first floor.

"Harakawa really did return alone, Kaku."

"And Heo's off to UCAT after checking on her great-grandfather's corpse. …At least it doesn't look like Harakawa had his memory erased."

"True," said Kazami while leaning against Izumo's motorcycle that was parked below the tree. "They'll probably wait until Heo returns to the States for that. She might ask to meet him before then."

She shrugged and pulled a cellphone from her pocket. She sent an email instead of making a call. She wanted to contact Sayama every so often, but she had not been able to reach him since he had entered the 4th-Gear reservation. That was why she used email.

…Harakawa is back.

She looked down to check the message.

“Harakiri is back.”

Distracted by what the autocorrect had chosen, she reentered the message.

“I also need to mention this.”

She pulled a folded piece of paper from her back pocket. It was a single faxed page.

The document was related to Heo Thunderson’s “demon”. Sibyl had hunted down a newspaper article about her mother’s death and had also sent a copy to IAI headquarters where Sayama and Shinjou were headed.

Izumo peered in from the side and frowned for once.

“That was a weird story.”

“You think so too? It was a lot like a monster movie. Her mother was brutally killed and the villagers saw a giant shadow, but for some reason, her mother was smiling.”

Kazami did not understand why she would have smiled.

“The police speculated that she had relaxed because the murderer had been someone close to her and the journalist guessed it was a satisfied smile because she had protected her daughter from the murderer. Either way, it’s a depressing story.”

Kazami typed in the information they had received from Sibyl and Kanda.

There was a lot to tell.

First, the Americans had determined it was Black Sun that had carried Harakawa and Heo away.

They based this on the fact that Thunderson had said none of the 5th-Gear mechanical dragons remained and because a Black Sun-like reading had once more been detected off the coast of Kantou.

Japanese UCAT would soon do what they had agreed on while speaking with Sayama and Shinjou the night before.

Also, they were planning to keep Harakawa under surveillance.

“There’s still a lot we don’t know, but we have no choice but to act.”

With that, she pressed the send button.

The send screen opened, the shaman girl saying “sending” danced three times, and the screen vanished.

“Now, then,” she said while leaning against the back of the motorcycle. She felt a tugging pain in her side, but she had placed a charm on it and there was nothing more she could do at the moment.

As for what she could do…

“We have to wait for some movement related to Heo Thunderson. When we called, Sibyl said they were doing well.”

“She’s holding it together pretty well given the situation. …Anyway, should we really sit around waiting for Harakawa? Shouldn’t we get back to UCAT and-…”

“Don’t worry. Sibyl said everything’s okay. If we’re going to head back, let’s stick around here for as long as we can first.”

She took a breath.

“And you saw those two in the Nishitama Cemetery, right? Do you really think they can be separated? She was watching Harakawa’s back as much as the scenery around her and he didn’t turn around even though he noticed. If anyone can get Heo Thunderson moving in the next few days, it’s Harakawa.”

She was oddly sure of that, but it came from how the girl had chosen him even when she had to run away.

“Also,” said Kazami. “Unlike when I took part in that first battle because of you, Harakawa has no method or connections for entering a concept space. When a young man wants to meet the princess in the castle, he needs a wizard to give him a magic tool.”

“That young man just needs some guts. Plus, it’s been less than a day since the two of them met.”

Izumo sounded doubtful as he leaned against the driver’s seat and Kazami looked up at him.

She could only smile bitterly at what he said. To say why, she brought a hand to her chest and gave him a true smile.

“Have you forgotten? There’s at least one precedent of someone making up their mind in such a short time. …And it’s right here.”

“How about you refresh my memory? You’re saying it’s here? Right here?”

He shoved his face into her track suit, so she hit him.

He spun back through the air and collapsed onto the motorcycle.

“Ah.”

The two of them fell backwards on the tilting vehicle.

A long, white, and windowless corridor had a drink vending machine by the wall, doors on either side of it, and a placard saying “Locker Rooms”.

A single sound filled that empty space.

The automatic door to the women's locker room on the right opened and a girl stepped out.

She had short, blonde hair.

She wore a blue armored uniform that had been lightened by removing the skirt and as much of the armor as possible. A necklace made of stones hung from her neck and she wore an orange work jacket that hid her shoulders.

The jacket had a number of different crests and the chest had a nametag.

That nametag said "Heo Thunderson".

She wore that coat to protect her from the air of that empty space, but she had no color in her face. She also had no expression, so her face was pale and blank.

She lowered that empty face as if bowing.

"Great-grandfather."

She raised her head again and spotted a water fountain next to the vending machine and a mirror on the wall to its left.

She looked in the mirror and found she appeared dull in the colorless light. If there was any color in her, it was the slight redness at the corners of her eyes.

She approached the mirror and gently placed her hands on her upper cheeks while trying not to press too hard on the red and swollen areas around her eyes.

"…"

She then noticed sudden movement.

It came from the water fountain to her right, but it was not that the device had activated.

"Eh?"

She trembled as the water fountain approached her. Instead of rolling on wheels, it moved its body back and forth to crawl on the metal parts on the base that resembled legs.

…*U-um*… She did not know what was happening, but she instinctually shrank down.

The water fountain noticed her action, took a half step back, and looked up at her.

"…"

It bent forward as if in disappointment.

It turned around and slowly swayed its way over to a corner of the wall.

"U-um."

She spoke up without thinking and it stopped, twisted its body, and looked toward her.

Its supposedly nonexistent gaze met hers.

On the way to the hospital to see her great-grandfather's body, a man named Roger had given her a lot of information in the form of a dream.

Seeing it in a dream still felt strange to her, but she believed it because Roger had confirmed what she had seen once she had woken up.

…Is it like a device that teaches you while you sleep?

There was a lot she did not understand, but there were other things she did.

Long ago, her great-grandfather had belonged to an organization called UCAT that protected the world.

He and some others had destroyed a few worlds, the world was once more headed toward destruction, Japanese UCAT was trying to singlehandedly negotiate with

the survivors of the other worlds, and they had shown they were not up to the task.

Of the other worlds known as Gears with which the negotiations were complete, there had been one which gave life to machines.

The water fountain in front of her had to be that.

She regulated her breathing, crouched down, and held her hand out toward it.

“Shake.”

Is that what I should say? she wondered, but it finally turned toward her.

It shook itself back and forth to approach at its full speed.

It tilted upwards as if to lick her hand.

“Ah.”

The water got on her hand.

She honestly commented that it was cold.

After cooling her finger to a certain extent, she brought it to the corner of her eye and brought her other hand to the water fountain.

It was hard and cold, just like a machine. However, this machine was alive.

Realizing that, she tilted her head and brought her hand around to its neck.

She stroked it there and it twisted around a little to rub up against her hand.

Someone then arrived in the waiting area to the left.

“I see you have finished changing.”

It was Roger and he soon realized she was playing with the water fountain.

“Cute, isn’t it? Of course, we only saw it for the first time yesterday.”

“It was a little surprising.”

She smiled, but she was aware there was no strength in it. Still, she was relieved to find she had regained a little of what had left her since visiting the hospital.

She continued rubbing the living water fountain's neck and spoke.

"I think my great-grandfather planned to tell me a lot of different things once he brought me here."

"I can only speculate, but I would say that is likely."

He pushed up his glasses and glanced over her body.

"Those clothes may be a little tight, but they are perfect for adding concept effects. An airplane home is waiting at Yokota, so I will see you off."

"What about my great-grandfather?"

Roger lowered his gaze before answering.

"The autopsy has not yet been performed, so he will be sent back to his homeland later. …The thing that attacked you and that boy may have been targeting some special characteristic of Mr. Richard's."

Heo recalled the wind that had carried them away in the cemetery.

"Isn't that demon after me?"

"Do you remember what you were taught in that dream? Mr. Richard is the one who fought that demon named Black Sun. If it is after you as well, loading the body on the airplane…" Roger altered his wording. "Being with the body would likely double the odds of Black Sun attacking."

He continued speaking to distract from his insensitive phrasing and he nodded toward her.

"But we have the Concept Core here to lure in Black Sun. It is approaching Tokyo while resting from the exhaustion of the battle the other day. The airplane

prepared at Yokota has been modified to mask the string vibrations of anything inside, so Black Sun will come here without targeting you."

"You're going to fight that demon?"

"That is why we are here. Ever since Mr. Richard was with us, American UCAT has been obsessed with defeating it."

"I see."

Heo stood and rubbed the edge of the water fountain that also straightened up.

It pressed up against her before returning to the wall.

Heo looked at Roger and wondered what expression was on her face.

"I should be worried for all of you, shouldn't I? …But will you tell me one thing? What will happen to me once I am returned to the States?"

Roger listened to Heo's question.

The ends of the girl's eyebrows were lowered and her lips were slightly parted.

Roger felt she looked more doubtful than questioning and more confused than uneasy.

However, he ignored the passive phrasing and answered.

"Once you return, you will live in a city managed by American UCAT. As a relative of Mr. Richard's, UCAT views you as the descendent of a hero, so you can live out the rest of your life with no issue. You can live a normal life now."

He shrugged and hoped the girl was feeling at ease.

"…"

However, she was left speechless and looked dumbfounded.

I suppose she would be, he thought. *She was repeatedly transferring between schools, no one would believe what she said, and her everyday life was a challenge, but now she is being given a fixed home, everything she has said is being accepted as true, and her everyday life is stabilizing.*

She should have no complaints, yet…

…It is ironic that she gained all this from her great-grandfather's death.

But, he said in his heart before continuing out loud.

"Is anything else bothering you?"

She tensed her shoulders.

"No."

However, she quickly shook her head, took in a breath, and puffed out her chest a little.

"I'm sorry. There actually is."

She lowered her head and lightly held her own body.

"Why did Harakawa and I move to the beach like that?"

"Optical stealth is one of Black Sun's special techniques, so we have determined that was its doing. Also, it lurks in the ocean off of Hokkaido, so it likely brought the two of you there to…"

He was going to say "execute you", but he decided against it. He crossed his arms to buy a moment of time before continuing.

"Anyway, it may have decided to give up on that plan once it noticed us pursuing it or once it noticed this country's self-defense force had sent out a fighter without telling us."

Heo remained silent and she lowered her head as if she could not accept it.

In truth, Roger had not fully accepted that explanation either. However, that was the only explanation with the facts available to them and Roger was not the type to obsess over an unanswerable question.

So…

“Is there something else?”

“Oh, yes. …Where is Harakawa?”

“He was escorted home. At a later date, the base should send him a reward for protecting you.”

Roger brought his right hand to his mouth to hide his expression, but his eyes remained fixed on Heo.

“We will have to prevent him from speaking about these events. It is unlikely anyone would believe him, but we cannot allow this to get out.”

“I know. That’s how it was for me…”

He saw her shoulders droop as she watched him.

But then footsteps and a female voice approached from the passageway on the left.

“Oh, Heo? Have you finished changing?”

Heo’s shoulders jumped a bit and she turned to the left, as did Roger.

“Oh, it’s Diana,” he said.

As she had called the girl “Heo”, he deduced she had met her before. However, he had been with Heo when she was led to the locker room.

As Roger wondered what this meant, he saw that Heo was at a complete loss for words. Diana wore her usual a black suit and she tightly embraced the girl when she reached her.

“You’re finally here, aren’t you? You’ve grown so much. Roger, you didn’t do anything did you? You didn’t say anything strange, teach her anything strange, touch her anywhere strange, or jump around strangely?”

“What?” replied Roger.

As he tilted his head, Diana enjoyed herself by placing her chin on Heo’s head. However, she still turned toward him.

“What kind of-…”

Before he could ask what their relationship was, Heo moved. She pulled her face away from Diana’s breasts, gasped for breath, and looked up at the woman in surprise.

“Wh-why are you here, teacher!?”

Diana’s eyes narrowed and Roger asked another question.

“Diana, what does she mean by ‘teacher’?”

“I was worried about you, Heo, so I ended my beauty treatment early.”

“Diana, is it just me or did you intentionally ignore me just now?”

“Hm?”

It was only after hugging Heo again that she looked to him.

Still looking confused, Heo turned toward him and gave a frantic explanation.

“U-um… Mrs. Diana is my tutor. She was apparently my mother’s friend, so my great-grandfather had her teach me once I started transferring between schools too much. She lived with us for a while and she taught me how to cook and speak Japanese. …It’s been three years since I last saw her, though.”

“That’s right,” said Diana quietly.

However, a sudden voice burst from the floor.

“A tutor!?”

The power maintenance cover on the floor was knocked into the air by a headbutt and Ooshiro’s head stuck out from the opening.

The cover embedded itself into the ceiling a bit and he looked utterly shocked down below.

“Th-this is a brand new genre, Diana-kun! A well-endowed foreign wife teacher!? How strangely bizarre can you get!? I’m so glad I’m the director of Japanese UCAT! There are so many new and exciting things on a daily basis!!”

“Wh-who are you calling a brand new genre!? And UCAT Director Ooshiro, this is a repeat joke!”

“A repeat joke!? It isn’t, it isn’t! It’s a new genre, so it’s a new joke!”

He wiggled around and used a feminine voice, so Heo trembled and looked to Diana.

“T-teacher, what is that?”

“Shh. Don’t look at him. His germs can infect your mind through the eyes.”

“D-Diana-kun! Don’t teach that girl lies!”

After Ooshiro’s shouted protest, Roger pushed his glasses up his nose and spoke.

“I apologize for interrupting your excitement, UCAT Director Ooshiro.”

“Oh, Roger-kun. Long time, no see. You seem to be doing well. …So what do you want? Well? Are you lonely? Then go cry on your own. Relying on me is a big no-no. Okay?”

“How about you say that into a mirror so I don’t have to deal with you? Also…”

Roger thought and finally spoke to the old man again.

“What is 1 + 1?”

“Two.”

As soon as he answered, the cover fell from the ceiling. And it was oriented vertically.

With his lips still forming the “oo” of “two”, he sank down below the floor.

The cover caught on the edges of the hole and fell into place. That sound was accompanied by the sound of something falling and collapsing down below.

Roger wiped the sweat from his brow and turned to the teacher and student embracing and looking cautiously toward the hole in the floor.

“We will disinfect him and capture him. From there, he will be sent to a cell.”

Mikage was in an open space.

It was the rest area on UCAT’s first basement that had a large mirror on the wall.

The neighboring space was even larger, but that was the cafeteria.

People in blue armored uniforms were using the cafeteria for a change.

…When is Ryuuji-kun getting here?

She sat in a chair and a large white table sat before her.

Her hands were up on the table and they held a piece of colored paper.

Hiba had given her the paper before she had taken her nap. He had said to wait in the cafeteria if he was not around when she woke up and he had given her 150 pieces of colored paper to kill time with.

He had not been around when she had awoken under the nap room bed the previous night.

She had gone down to the cafeteria, but the usual people in white armored uniforms had been gone.

Instead, everyone was wearing blue.

…Did they change the uniform?

Still, she had found it unusual that no one was shouting strange things or attacking each other. She had made her way here, but a few men in blue had stopped her. When she had tilted her head, they had placed an armband on her.

She did not entirely understand, but it apparently meant she was a guest.

She had been here ever since and about half of the paper was gone.

She looked to the side and saw someone folding colored paper just like her.

That person's body was also…no, it was even more of a doll's body than her own.

She had red hair and went by the name #8. She had said her body was destroyed due to her inexperience, so she had switched over to a spare body. She was currently wearing a white shirt and jeans that had been supplied for her.

Mikage folded the paper along with her to both kill time and help with the automaton's rehabilitation.

"Ryuuji-kun is late."

However, he had never said when he would arrive, so it might have still been too early.

I don't want to wait too long, she thought.

She looked up and saw some people sitting across the table from her.

Those men and women were all wearing blue armored uniforms and they were all holding colored paper she had handed them.

She did not understand their language, but she would use gestures to show them how to fold the paper when they asked.

“Yes. Folding it like that makes people happy.”

She folded, #8 folded next to her, and the red-haired automaton spoke while checking the movements of her fingers.

“Excuse me, Mikage-sama, but this is not a very accurate motion.”

“Ryuuji-kun said that’s better. He said it’s better to have mistakes.”

“I do not want many mistakes.”

“Then you do make some mistakes?”

That made Mikage happy and she said something else to #8.

“We’re the same.”

#8 looked back at her with slightly raised eyebrows, but she soon turned back to the colored paper.

“I apologize for my lack of knowledge. I see now that I was wrong.”

“It’s okay. I’m not very smart.”

So relax, she happily thought. *I’m glad something like this is enough for me to relax.*

She did not know what kind of expression to make at times like this, but Hiba had said it would come out on its own without her having to make it.

She wondered if that was happening now. She thought she looked expressionless on the mirror covering the wall, but that might not have been the case.

She did not know the answer, but it did not feel bad and she did not mind.

Her body was definitely improving, bit by bit.

She also thought her mind was improving as she learned more and more, but the others would improve as well and so the distance between them would not change. She focused more on the happiness that they were all improving than on that gap.

…I can't wait.

While folding the paper, she told herself that the future was sure to be infinitely more enjoyable than anything so far. She finished the final fold along with the dark-skinned woman across from her and held up the paper.

She inflated it, spread it out, and folded out the front of the portions sticking up on the front and back.

"A crane."

That was what they had both made. The woman whistled at what she held in her hand.

The two cranes were shaped slightly differently, but the expressions on their faces were the same.

The woman said something and #8 translated.

"She said she will teach her child how to do this once she returns to her home country."

#8 then held out the paper she was folding. The creases on the paper had dotted lines across them, arrows to show the direction, and numbers to show the order.

The woman took it and brought her hands together.

Mikage did the same in return and all the people in blue armored uniforms quickly took the same pose.

“Namu.”

#8 frantically looked across them all, but Mikage felt it was unavoidable. That automaton still was not used to how things were done here.

Mikage thought while exchanging nods with all of the people across the table from her.

…*Where are all the people in the white uniforms?*

And…

…*Ryuuji-kun really is late.*

Hiba was inside a small room.

It was located on UCAT’s first basement and one wall was covered by a large window.

The placard by the entrance called it the Hidden Rest Area.

The window was a one-way mirror and it gave him a view of the rest area next to the cafeteria. The window was located to his left and he could see Mikage sitting at the table in the other room.

She, an automaton, and the American UCAT members observing her were all folding the colored paper he had given her.

She had likely been folding the paper ever since she had been taken into American UCAT custody. She was also waiting for him.

“That must be nice…”

He sighed toward her back and then faced forward.

His hands were not on the table before him because they were handcuffed behind his chair.

These handcuffs had been placed on him the moment he had been captured.

A man sat across the table from him. The bearded man in a blue armored uniform had spoken in Japanese to introduce himself as a sergeant and to say Hiba was to be interrogated.

“Let me ask again,” said the sergeant. “How many people have evacuated down below, how many are injured, and what kind of weaponry do they have?”

“Of course I’m not going to tell you any of that.”

Hiba placed his head on the table and faced sideways so he could calm himself by watching Mikage’s back.

“If you just tell me already, I’ll take you to that world of freedom out there.”

“What are you talking about? It’s better to hide while watching.”

“This seemed like a good place for an interrogation, but what is the point of this room anyway?”

“You don’t know? For the non-humans, especially werewolves or aquatic types, it’s apparently painful to wear clothes for long periods of time. But they can’t exactly strip in front of people, right? So when they can’t stand it anymore they come here, strip naked, and enjoy some virtual streaking.”

Hiba and the sergeant glanced around the room. It contained a radio-cassette player with an exercise tape inside, a hula hoop and treadmill for exercise, and for some reason, a camera on a tripod.

The sergeant cleared his throat before speaking.

“They could just hide their nudity with an optical camouflage philosopher’s stone.”

“They apparently tried that, but things showed up while heading home in the rain or someone they happened to bump into on the street got a good grip on a certain part of their body. After that, they doubled down and created mosaic-style optical camouflage, but it apparently wasn’t popular with foreigners.”

“Ethics really are a tricky thing.”

The sergeant nodded in understanding, reached below the table, and pulled out a machine with a volume switch.

“Now, let’s get the interrogation started for real.”

“Y-you’re just as forceful as my upperclassmen! And what is that machine?”

“This is a philosopher’s stone interrogation device developed by American UCAT. It is called the Shameful 2000 and it contains a philosopher’s stone that will make you want to let out all your secrets. You will begin making confessions of your own accord in proportion to the volume setting. I’ll be fine since I have a philosopher’s stone with an opposing concept, but how long can you last?”

The sergeant suddenly turned the volume up halfway.

—**Secrets are not to be hidden.**

Hiba gave a quiet shriek and shrank down in his chair.

After thirty seconds, the Shameful 2000 gave a chime indicating it was done.

Hearing that, Hiba peered at the sergeant and the man peered back at him.

“Now, let me ask again. How many people have evacuated down below, how many are injured, and what kind of weaponry do they have?”

However, Hiba remained silent and the sergeant smiled.

“You’re focusing your thoughts, aren’t you?”

He raised the volume and Hiba began speaking with a perfectly seriously expression.

“A bath with Mikage-san. A bath with Mikage-san. A bath with Mikage-san. A bass with Mikage-san. A ass with Mikage-san. A bath with Mikage-san’s ass. A bath with Mikage-san’s breasts. A bath with touching Mikage-sa- Oh, no! My focusing thoughts are leaking out!”

“How in the world is that focusing your thoughts!?”

“Don’t underestimate the Japanese, you American! You may have everything out in the open all the time, but our race has a special skill to burn everything into our memories in an instant! When she sits in front of you with a short skirt, leans forward in a shirt, or touches you without thinking, that skill activates! You can almost feel the power coursing through your mind!!! If you take a bath with them, the constant damage to your focus causes your latent powers to awaken! Long live the infinite plain!! And I’ve gotten awfully honest under this confession concept, haven’t I!?”

The sergeant raised the volume to maximum.

“Ah,” said Hiba and a change came over his expression.

Despite all the previous yelling, his expression grew completely blank and he fell silent.

Meanwhile, the sergeant sighed, wiped the sweat form his brow, adjusted his position in his chair, and faced Hiba’s empty eyes.

“Now, let me ask yet again. How many people have evacuated down below, how many are injured, and what kind of weaponry do they have?”

There was a short pause before Hiba answered.

He turned his distant, dead eyes toward the sergeant and spoke with his mouth hanging open.

“Oh,” he said first. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I actually gathered online images of that foreign model because I thought she looked like Mikage-san. I’m sorry. The other day when we were eating lunch on the emergency stairs. I’m sorry. I couldn’t help but look when the wind blew up Kazami-san’s skirt. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Two days ago, I saw Shinjou-san (Boy Ver.)’s underwear from under the arm of the armored uniform. I noticed that it was green but I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh, no. Did I take it too far?”

The sergeant lowered the volume to about halfway and Hiba’s expression returned to normal.

“Listen! If you want to focus the mind properly, you need to focus on the shameful things that-…”

He brought the volume back to maximum.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I only touched Mikage-san’s butt in the bath seven days ago because-…”

“This is hopeless.”

The sergeant lowered the volume to zero and then raised it again.

“Wh-what do you mean hopel- Just coursing through your- I’m sorry.”

“This is definitely hopeless.”

He fully lowered the volume again and Hiba tilted his head toward him.

“Is it really?”

“Yes, so let’s take a more physical route. I’ll be using concepts so it won’t leave any marks.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t waste my time if I were you. I had a fortunetelling done earlier and it said I’m the dog type, so this probably won’t work. It said I’m a dog that loves its master even if it finds that master annoying. It was that punching bag

fortunetelling machine in the entertainment room we passed on the way here. I think it's called 'A Direct Hit to Your True Character'. Anyway, everyone was a little disturbed by my result."

"Hmm. Then I guess it wouldn't count as torture if I chained you up and hit you until you cried."

"Um, sorry, but wasn't this supposed to be an interrogation?"

The two of them exchanged a glance and groaned as they thought.

A moment later, a noise reached them.

It was a high-pitched and carrying noise that repeated again and again.

"An alarm!?" shouted the sergeant as he turned toward Hiba.

Hiba collapsed on the table and looked toward Mikage. The people around her were moving, but she was slowly folding the colored paper.

"That must be nice… And I guess it's about time for what we set up."

That comment was followed by a shouted announcement.

"Emergency! Everyone on the surface, be on the lookout! A transport lift is rising from underground! It's carrying…"

After a breath, the voice continued.

"The Vesper Cannon!!"

"When they deem the time is right, Japanese UCAT will strike back while using the Vesper Cannon as a decoy."

Sayama's voice filled the mountains as he walked.

The sky above his head was almost entirely filled with the colors of night. He held two travel bags and walked through a large parking lot with Shinjou who had a flower in her hair.

“Do you think they’re all okay?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“American UCAT is spread out to deal with Black Sun and Japanese UCAT is divided between a concept space unit and a normal space unit. The enemy cannot gather into a single army as when they attacked, so if our side gathers on one side or the other, they have a chance.”

To their left and continuing into the forest behind them was a long runway. A small airplane with the IAI emblem was stopped on that runway.

Their destination was the white building up ahead.

Much like a large hospital, the facility rose five stories above ground level and it too contained the IAI emblem.

“That’s IAI headquarters, isn’t it?” said Shinjou. “We’ve finally come here.”

Most of the building’s windows were dark as business hours were already over.

However, two people stood in front of the building.

One was a blonde maid with a blue stone pendant hanging from her neck.

The other was a girl with semi-long black hair who wore a lab coat. She raised a hand in greeting.

“Should I just say hi? It seems like things have gotten exciting at Okutama.”

“Indeed they have.” Sayama nodded with a bitter smile. “Think of it alike an athletic festival between Japan and America. At any rate, it is strange to meet you like this. Are you undergoing UCAT training, Tsukuyomi Miyako-kun?”

“Yeah, and I’m glad to see you’re as self-important as ever. Right now I’m being trained in reproducing weakened concepts. If you like, I could make you one with some leftover materials. …This is Moira 1st. You remember her, right?”

Miyako said it was time to get going and turned around. She faced the dimly-lit entrance to IAI headquarters and tapped Moira 1st on the shoulder. The maid bowed toward the two visitors and turned in the same direction as Miyako.

“I will show you the way to Japanese UCAT’s western general headquarters, supporters of the Leviathan Road.”

“Please do. Here, we should be able to find records from before UCAT’s blank period, such as employee records from the Izumo company days. We are looking for pre-World War Two records on Kinugasa Tenkyou and a man named Shinjou Kaname. Also, any records of people with the surname Shinjou from around twenty years after that.”

Sayama quickened his pace as he spoke and he stepped up onto the raised tile in front of the entrance.

“Doctor Chao mentioned a New Year’s card from the Shinjou family which referenced a child. Upon learning of their father, that child might have gone to the same place as him to learn more about him. Much like we are doing now. …And as a child born during the war, they likely married during the sixties and had a child. And in that case…”

Sayama looked behind him and to Shinjou who was currently Sadame. She met his gaze with a stiff expression.

However, he ignored her tension and spoke without hesitation.

“The odds are good that your father, the one you inherited the surname Shinjou from, was Shinjou Kaname’s grandson. …Let us hurry. The others will have secured a place for us by the time we return.”

At exactly 8:00 PM, the American UCAT teams guarding the large explosion-resistant doors sealing off Japanese UCAT's fourth basement and below realized a group of people in white and black armored uniforms had appeared without opening the doors.

They had opened a small concept space and passed through the door inside it.

American UCAT was slow to react because they were dealing with the appearance of the Vesper Cannon on the surface and trying to find a way to attach it to one of their Blanca 9 mechanical dragons.

The group in white charged toward American UCAT while letting out a shout.

"Hello!!"

They did not yell loud enough, so they did it again.

"Hellooooo!!"

They all rushed forward and a flow of blue expanded on the building's aboveground area to fight back.

The second clash was beginning.

Chapter 23: Developing Assignment

Chapter 23

“Developing Assignment”

How does it unfold?
How does it open?

How does it unfold?

How does it open?

Someone ran down a white corridor.

The corridor was long. It was filled with nothing but light and the doors on either side were closed.

The person running down it was a young man in a lab coat. He wore a worn-out shirt and chino pants below that lab coat. He wore rubber sandals on his feet, but each running step carried him an entire room's length down the corridor.

"Oh, dammit. If only Atsuta were here. Why is that creature obsessed with Okinawa right now?"

The young man pushed his glasses up his nose and the motion revealed the name Kashima on the collar that whipped in the wind.

Kashima was trying to reach the other end of the corridor.

At the same time, people charged in from either side of the T-shaped juncture up ahead. There were six of them and they all wore blue armored uniforms and wielded meter-long electromagnetic batons.

Also, the armor at the bases of their limbs swelled out.

"They have mechanical parts installed there for close-quarters combat. Are they after me specifically?"

He nevertheless continued forward and amongst the six men.

"Ahh," he sighed. "This is such a pain and so boring."

He stepped forward.

“Even if I filmed it, I wouldn’t be able to show Natsu-san or Harumi.”

He spun around.

“I can’t use my camera here.”

He ran below the electromagnetic baton swung down by the first man on the right. He approached close enough for an embrace, so the man frantically stepped back.

The man turned around to fall back without pressing his back to the wall and he did so with the inhuman speed the mechanical parts of his armor allowed.

But Kashima caught up in a single leap. He twisted his body to control his midair position as he approached.

“You have a lot to learn about military gods.”

He lightly clenched his fist and drove it into the man’s chest. The heavy armor had the strength of a metal panel, but it still broke. The steel armor shattered like dried clay.

“——!?”

Kashima gave an instantaneous shrug when he heard the soldier’s confused cry.

“Did you really think armor and weapons below the divine level would be of any use against a military god?”

With that, he completely broke the man’s armored uniform. Cracks ran through it starting from the chest and all of the mechanical parts burst from within.

Sounds of breaking metal filled the air and the broken mechanical parts briefly sent the entire uniform out of control.

With no control over his suit, the soldier was sent flying backwards along with the fragments.

He collapsed with a sound resembling shattering glass.

Kashima then looked behind him.

An instant later, a line of silver flew toward him.

It was a blade. The other five had abandoned their electromagnetic batons and drawn the knives with sixty centimeter blades stored on their backs.

The first caught Kashima off guard and grazed his cheek.

The very next moment, he brought a hand to that cheek.

He saw a hint of red on his fingers.

“Have you altered those with some kind of concept?”

To respond, three of them moved in at once. They rushed toward him.

However, he moved forward and only at a walk.

“…”

The three wielding knives seemed to break past Kashima and the other two watched him continue to walk.

However…

“_____?”

They could not see him. The three up ahead produced mechanical sounds as they stopped and frantically turned around.

“_____!?”

They could not see him. Nevertheless, Kashima simply walked between the group of three and the group of two. He walked toward the latter group.

“Yeah,” he said. “Even when I put this much effort into my work…”

He lightly raised his hands.

“I can’t even let the people I most care about see it.”

He stepped between the two men who were looking all around.

“And I can’t hear them praise me.”

He tapped them on the shoulder.

“Being a father isn’t easy.”

As if those words were the cue, all five armored uniforms shattered. Not just those on either side of Kashima, but the three who had passed by him as well.

The series of five sounds resembled shattering glass and just as many people collapsed to the ground.

Once Kashima reached the end of the corridor, he looked both ways.

“I see. So those six were supposed to force me out here where you would shoot me.”

About three meters in both direction, he saw a double barricade made of desks and the barrels of anti-tank rifles were peeking out from behind them.

There were eighteen barrels in all and they all shook as they sent an intense noise toward Kashima.

The entire corridor shook, the gunshots collided and left the audible range, and all sound vanished.

And tearing through the leading edge of that soundlessness were eighteen armor-piercing rounds modified for concept combat.

“!”

Eighteen sprays of sparks filled the silence.

The scattering red flames vanished in the air, the air carried a faint scorched smell, and then came the wind.

The sound of the wind swept across the corridor and washed over everything.

The white steam produced by the colliding shockwaves was swept away by the wind and everyone looked down the corridor. Two people stood on both sides of the young man in a lab coat.

They were four old men.

The first on the right had wavy gray hair, wore a white armored uniform, and held an Azure Dragon Sword toward the opposing guns.

“I am Ikkou, the eldest brother. A pleasure to meet you.”

The second on the right had long gray hair, wore a lab coat, and held a charm toward the opposing guns.

“I am Nijun, the second brother. A pleasure to meet you.”

The first on the left had short gray hair, wore a lab coat, and held a meter-long scroll toward the opposing guns.

“I am Mitsuaki, the third brother. A pleasure to meet you.”

And the second on the left had long black hair, wore a flight jacket, and held nothing.

“Ummm, I’m like Yonkichi, the fourth brother. It’s like super nice to meet you or whatever.”

The three other men began attacking him.

“Damn you. You’ve started giving yourself terrible idiosyncrasies again, haven’t you?”

“I’ve had enough. It’s time we castrated him.”

“Brother! Brother! Leave it to me!”

Among the noise and voices, Kashima once more began walking and the gun barrels turned toward him.

“…?”

But they lost sight of him. Even as Kashima sped up to a run, he shouted toward the four men behind him.

“They can see you!”

Hearing that, the three elder brothers stopped moving and made an immediate decision.

They kicked the youngest brother into the center of the corridor and returned the way they had come.

The attack began anew and gunfire arrived from either side of the corridor.

Kashima continued forward while he heard Yonkichi cry out behind him. For some reason, the old man sounded like he was enjoying it.

“What a pain. There are just too many of them.”

He crouched down and slipped below the bullets and shockwaves.

“But I want to take back this place before the Sayama boy returns.”

“Could you climb up to reach that document, Shinjou-kun? The L row is over there.”

Sayama’s voice filled a large space divided up by bookcases.

He was crouching in front of one bookcase and Shinjou listened to him under the shadow it formed in the fluorescent lighting.

“The S row you mean?”

“’No, the L row. L for lecherous old man, Shinjou-kun.”

“Sayama-kun, you sometimes use oddly old-fashioned words, don’t you?”

She looked up at the L bookcase. The document was in the middle of a shelf two meters up. She was not sure what to do, but the green creature they had let out of the bag walked over and stood below the document in question.

It seemed to be asking her to step up on it.

She hesitated, but she did so after removing her shoes. She looked to either side while reaching up for the document.

The bookcases almost seemed to continue on forever. She could see the end, but it still seemed like an unusually large space. It was nearly two hundred meters across and probably fifty meters wide.

This was the concept space reference room below Japanese UCAT’s western general headquarters.

All the documents for both UCAT and the Izumo Company days were stored here.

…Would Japanese UCAT’s reference room be this big if you combined the first and second ones?

As she wondered that, she saw several people moving about.

Miyako was standing near the entrance as their supervisor.

Moira 1st was moving between the bookcases and retrieving documents, Moira 3rd was copying the documents Moira 1st gave her, Moira 2nd was preparing tea near Miyako, and Gyes was standing in wait next to Miyako.

…They’re on our side now.

Shinjou found that strange as she grabbed the document.

The movement shook her hair. She had changed into Setsu's clothes before coming here, but she still had Sadame's hairstyle and that difference felt almost ticklish.

"Hey, Sayama-kun? Did you mean this one?"

She turned to Sayama who was crouched down to her right and he looked up at her with squinted eyes that seemed to stare into the distance.

"Yes, at that height, I can indeed see your underwear through the gap in your culottes, Shinjou-kun."

She jumped down and kneed him from above. The idiot collapsed on the floor, but he put on a charming look as he sat back up.

"Wh-what was that for, Shinjou-kun? I am simply shocked."

"I don't care if you're shocked. …And how can you say something like that when the others are busy fighting American UCAT back at Okutama!?"

"I only asked if you could climb up to reach it. I never said you should."

I need to keep a little more distance, she told herself.

She crouched down toward the green creature that was emitting air, rubbed its head, and it rubbed her head with its front leg.

It was producing a lot of air, so she was apparently quite tired.

Someone then appeared from behind the bookcase. It was Moira 1st.

"Master Sayama, Lady Shinjou. A fax has arrived from below Japanese UCAT. It is a newspaper article related to a Heo Thunderson's past. Also, I have the copies of the documents I gathered."

Despite her words, Moira 1st frowned. Wondering why, Shinjou followed her gaze and saw the plant creature rubbing her head. Shinjou tilted that head.

“Moira 1st-san, do you not like these people?”

“No, it is not that. But 4th-Gear can instantly accomplish what our various services are meant to provide our master. …They are a formidable foe that removes a large portion of what makes our work enjoyable.”

“I-I guess we all have it tough.”

“Indeed,” said a voice behind her. “Moira 1st-kun, I have an idea for when the world has been made equal. We can create a 4th-Gear massage center that provides instant relief from one’s exhaustion and a 3rd-Gear service center that does the same over a longer period of time. Then the two can compete.”

“There is no need. We would obviously win, after all.”

“3rd-Gear sure is amazing in a lot of different ways,” muttered Shinjou as the green creature expelled a lot of air as if in agreement.

Seeing that, Moira 1st brought a hand to her cheek.

“Oh, dear. Please cheer up, Lady Shinjou. Um, if you use one of 3rd’s secret tools, it may be a bit immoral, but…”

“I-I don’t need any tools.”

“But it sounds useful,” chimed in Sayama.

As she stood up, Shinjou tightened the necktie next to her and stopped Moira 1st who was searching for something in her apron.

“More importantly,” she said while holding out a hand to stop the automaton. “U-um? Can we have the copies you made?”

“Yes, of course. Here they are.”

Moira 1st handed Sayama the article on Heo and the multiple copied documents to Shinjou.

“I have determined these are the documents on Master Shinjou Kaname and his descendants.”

After taking the article on Heo, Sayama turned to Shinjou who stood to his right.

She looked blankly down at the documents related to Shinjou Kaname and his child.

“Are you surprised to find Shinjou Kaname’s employee information?”

“Uh, yes. A little.”

She let go of the left side of the documents and held them out toward him. He grabbed them and found that the man had started working at an Izumo Company factory in Yonago after graduating from a local elementary school. At fourteen, he had taken the company’s special skills lecture.

“I see. At sixteen, he entered Tokyo’s First Higher School. It also says he was Professor Tenkyou’s assistant, Shinjou-kun. …Where are the documents on Professor Kinugasa?”

Moira 1st shook her head.

“I could not find any employee documents on him. Instead, I found this.”

She pulled an envelope from the pocket on the back of her apron. Sayama took it with his right hand and found a stack of paper inside. Moira 1st nodded toward him.

“These are copies of the company reports from before and during the war. Professor Kinugasa sent in a few reports on Tokyo after going to the Okutama factory, which was a new company facility built there. They contain photos of the

factory, photos of Tokyo after the firebombing, and…a photo of his home in the mountains of Okutama.”

“When did the reports end?”

Shinjou stiffened at that question and Moira 1st’s smile vanished.

“August of 1946. A notification of his death was sent out that September. It happened on July 26. When he was making adjustments to an Izumo Company facility in the Kinki region, he died suddenly due to pneumonia he had developed from his exhaustion and the rain.”

“Is that so?”

Sayama nodded and said nothing more.

They had received some of the truth. There was still a lot they did not know about Professor Kinugasa, but they had information on his home, they had information on his death, and both of those meant he had actually existed. Sayama turned his thoughts to the Izumo Company facility in the Kinki region that he had last visited

…According to the Divine States-World Interaction Theory, that would be 10th-Gear’s location.

Yamata had been sealed on August 25 of the same year and it was entirely possible the Concept War to seal 10th-Gear’s Concept Core had occurred just before then.

However, that was all speculation. It would be a waste to think about it anymore, so he stopped.

Upon returning from his thoughts, he found Shinjou looking at him with a troubled expression.

“Sometimes your ability to focus seems really amazing, Sayama-kun.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You put things aside for the time being, but you don’t forget about them.”

“It is simply that I am unable to forget, Shinjou-kun. It is not a virtue or anything of the sort. It is much like being a stalker who resists pursuing his target. Although for a stalker, pursuing that target *would* be a virtue.”

After saying that, Sayama guessed why Shinjou had said what she said.

“Shinjou-kun, do you mean to say you want me to virtuously stalk you?”

“That isn’t virtuous! It’s a bother! Look, Miyako-san can’t believe what you’re saying!”

Sayama looked past Moira 1st and saw Miyako looking up at the ceiling. Her mouth spread apart horizontally and she called over to them.

“Do whatever you want.”

“See, Shinjou-kun? I have permission.”

“Just look at these documents. These ones right there. Do you see them?”

Sayama reluctantly lowered his gaze to the documents she was pushing toward him.

It was much like a resume. After the entries for the individual’s work experience while attending the First Higher School, it said he was accepted into the Naval Accounting School on a recommendation, but he was soon ordered to join the Izumo Company’s Tokyo factory.

…After earning his military qualifications, he must have joined the National Defense Department.

“In 1937 when he was nineteen, he was sent to the Izumo Company’s Tokyo factory. He married in 1938, he had a son named Yoshi in 1940…and he died in the bombing of Hachioji in 1945.”

He paused for a few seconds, but he knew that past definitely existed.

“Shinjou-kun, can I continue on to the next document?”

“Yes, you can. But…”

She looked to Moira 1st who simply stood there just as she had before.

“There seemed to be something in here, didn’t there, Moira 1st-san?”

“What makes you say that?”

A voice arrived from beyond the automaton. It was Miyako who ate a chocolate cigarette she pulled from her pocket.

“Automatons love serving people, so you would normally want them to hurry through all the documents and praise you for bringing them all. But instead you’re just standing there without even suggesting they continue on. Right?”

“Big sister doesn’t understand herself all that much! And yet she always tries to act like she’s more mature.”

After hearing that voice from a distant bookcase, Moira 1st turned around with a smile on her face.

“Excuse me for a moment. I must provide some discipline.”

“Try not to make it too exciting and shocking.”

Silence fell once Moira 1st nodded and left.

Sayama flipped to the next document with Shinjou. The copied paper below was another employee record.

“Shinjou Yoshi. He joined the company in 1956 and married Mitsu, a coworker, in 1958.”

But when his eyes reached the next line of the employee history, he stopped for a moment.

Shinjou did the same next to him, but that was exactly why Sayama moved once more. He had to read this.

Shinjou gasped and Sayama read through the rest of the document to force that breath out.

“In 1960, he had a daughter named Yukio. In the same year, he and his wife Mitsu died in an accident on a trip to Kinki.”

He heard her gasp again.

There were two reasons for this. First, Shinjou Kaname’s child Yoshi had died along with his wife.

And second…

“Their child, Shinjou Yukio, was…”

“A girl. If she got married, she would lose the surname Shinjou,” muttered Shinjou.

She lowered her head and sighed.

“Which means…”

She gulped but continued.

“She isn’t my parent.”

Sayama heard Shinjou speak the word “no” toward the floor.

And…

“What am I supposed to do?”

Her tone made it clear she did not want to accept this, so Sayama asked a sudden question.

“Well, Shinjou-kun?”

“Eh?”

Sayama gave an expressionless reply to her reflexive voice.

“Are you going to give up and throw all this away?”

“Throw it…away?”

“Yes. Are you going to throw away the past that has taken us this far?”

“But...”

She turned toward him and tilted her head with her eyebrows lowered.

“But there’s no point in learning any more. This Yukio is probably a completely normal person and she doesn’t even work here at IAI headquarters. As a woman, she can’t be my father, so she’s a completely unrelated Shinjou.”

She hit the back of the papers in her hand as she spoke. There were only the two: one for Shinjou Kaname and one for Shinjou Yoshi. As he listened to the almost nervous sound of the paper being struck, Sayama spoke.

“Listen, Shinjou-kun. What if you are Shinjou Yukio’s illegitimate child?”

“W-we can’t just say what if…”

“The idea that you are not related to Shinjou Yukio is also a what if. Do not say anything for sure until you have seen this through to the end. Even the past is overflowing with possibility as long as you have yet to see it. Just because Shinjou Yukio is a woman does not mean she is not your mother.”

“Why?”

Shinjou asked that disconnected question with a tremor in her voice and her eyebrows raised.

“Why? I was shown the deaths of so many different Shinjous today! And yet now you’re asking me to look into something else that’s as good as hopeless! Why!?”

Sayama opened his mouth and paused before replying.

“Do you know much about that song?”

“Eh?”

Her raised eyebrows shook and Sayama continued speaking toward that shaking.

“The song you sang when we first met.”

“O-of course I do. It’s called Silent Night, isn’t it? And I can sing up to the sixth verse. What about it? What’s your point?”

“Who do you think taught you that song?”

Answering her question with a question actually brought her mind in closer. She thought for a moment before answering.

“My mother, I guess. …It was probably a lullaby or something.”

“Then Shinjou Yukio is worth pursuing.”

He swung his left arm which tugged the documents from her right hand with a snapping sound.

She cried out in surprise and tried to reach for them, but he countered that by holding the paper toward her. He placed the very last line of the employee history right in front of her face.

“Read this carefully. It says the orphaned Yukio was left with a church orphanage in Sakai, doesn’t it?”

She gasped as she read the words.

“A church…and that’s a hymn.”

She slowly opened her mouth in a dumbfounded look.

She fell silent, but more words came to push her onward. These ones were in Miyako's voice.

"That's related to Japanese history. Sakai was the city in which the Bible spread during the Sengoku period and that trend has continued to this day."

"Precisely," replied Sayama. "Listen, Shinjou-kun. In that orphanage in the city of Sakai, don't you think Shinjou Yukio would have heard Silent Night at least on Christmas?"

"Then…you mean…"

Shinjou's eyebrows twisted in puzzlement, but Sayama smiled at her.

"We have no proof. Shinjou Yukio's parents were both from Low-Gear, so there is no chance of her having the same special characteristics as you. And as a woman, her surname would change upon marriage. …But as someone who has heard your song, I think it is too soon to give up. More importantly, the song you remember despite losing your memories is one that must have been close to Shinjou Yukio. …And if she had a child, she would have sung that song to the child."

Sayama continued as he brushed a hand through his hair in the fluorescent light.

"But the rest is up to you. Will you pursue her even if it might be hopeless? Or will you give up because it might be hopeless. The choice is in your hands, Shinjou-kun."

A white fluorescent light illuminated a small kitchen, a ten square meter room, and an entranceway.

Two people were in that entranceway: a woman standing with her back to the door and a boy sitting on the entranceway's wooden floor. The woman held a container sealed with cling wrap.

"Okay, Harakawa-kun. You'll be at school tomorrow, right?"

"I already said I would, Ooki-sensei."

Harakawa had changed out of his school uniform's shirt and into a black T-shirt and he looked to the woman in a brown suit before him.

"You sure have a lot of time on your hands. Don't you need to help prepare for the athletic festival?"

"No, my students are just so skilled."

"Then how about you get home already?"

"Well, there's something going on near my home. Y'know, with the American military."

"Oh, that," said Harakawa with a nod.

An airplane had crashed the day before and there were still traffic restrictions in Okutama.

"Once the cars clear out, I guess I'll go get my motorcycle from the Nishitama Cemetary."

"I think I'll head home by bicycle once that happens. My friends and acquaintances are working hard, so I need to buy a bunch of snacks for them at the convenience store."

She laughed happily and Harakawa sighed.

Meanwhile, she looked back toward him, narrowed her eyes, and tilted her head.

"Are you not having a good day, Harakawa-kun?"

“I don’t even feel like talking about it, Ooki-sensei.”

“Eh? Y-you mean, um, it’s something embarrassing?”

“Hold on,” he snapped back, but he stopped and rested his head on his hand.

He clicked his tongue once before looking toward Ooki whose face was flushed and who was forming a defensive stance.

“I don’t even know if it is or not. I can’t seem to work out what it is. All I get are the self-important ideas that maybe I should do something or that I should have done something.”

He closed his eyes.

“Well, I couldn’t do anything and I passed on the problem in the easiest direction.”

He lowered his head as it rested on his hand and another hand was placed on that head.

It was Ooki’s. He did not look up, but she patted his head with her palm.

“You really are kind, Harakawa-kun.”

“Is that so?” he replied. “The problem is I don’t know what the other person thinks.”

“You can’t know,” said Ooki with a smile in her voice. “I think part of the reason why people can be so kind is because they don’t know what the other person is thinking.”

“You only think that because you’re always talking about things without understanding them.”

“Y-you’re getting all cement-like too!?”

Ooki’s protest was immediately followed by a new sound.

Her shoulders jumped in surprise because it was a knock at the door behind her.

Ooki turned toward the two knocks and then glanced toward Harakawa.

“Um…” she said.

He nodded toward her, stood up, and reached past her and to the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Heo. Heo Thunderson.”

It sounded like the speaker had gulped just before speaking.

Harakawa opened the door. He did so immediately and without hesitation, but he did so slowly.

He found Heo there.

He first noticed the orange work jacket and the blue armored uniform much like those worn by the people he had seen in the cemetery.

He then saw her expression: lowered ends of the eyebrows but relaxed.

It was an expression of relief.

However, he also saw a car and a person behind her.

The car was a large black one much like the one that had brought him here and the person was a tall woman in a black suit.

Heo opened her mouth with those two things behind her. She also clenched her hands just below her neck.

“Um…”

Chapter 24: Heart of Identity

Chapter 24

“Heart of Identity”

If nothing is correct
But pure things become correct
Is it correct to wish for them?

If nothing is correct

But pure things become correct

Is it correct to wish for them?

Fluorescent light filled a small entranceway.

The door was shut and two people stood below that white light: Harakawa and Heo.

They were facing each other.

“Um…”

Heo began to speak and Harakawa listened silently.

Her gaze dropped to his neck but soon rose again.

“It seems the demon appeared again.”

“And it brought us on a trip to Chiba.”

“Sorry about all the trouble.”

“What you’re saying doesn’t follow, Heo Thunderson. Let’s have a proper conversation.”

“Eh?”

She tilted her head and finally looked him in the eye.

“You’re right.”

Her expression softened a bit. It now looked weak and resigned.

Meanwhile, he sighed and placed a hand on the wall.

“Why are you here, Heo Thunderson? You met the group called UCAT, didn’t you?”

During the car ride back home, he had been told about the death of Heo’s great-grandfather.

He had not been given the details, but they had said UCAT would be protecting Heo and ensuring her a place to live in the future. If she wanted anything, they would support her as much as they were able.

So if she said she wanted to run, they would continue to support her as long as she did not stop running.

…She’ll have all the freedom she wants.

“Isn’t that just perfect? You’ll live in America where you don’t have to use any weird Japanese and you can do whatever you want. You can be surrounded by people without having to fear anything.”

He said that because he thought it was the best thing for her to hear.

…That’s the opposite path from me.

That’s right, he silently complained.

It was best for her if she did not simply give up like he had. And she had been given this blessing because…

“Someone is wishing for your happiness.”

With that, he nodded. He directed it both toward Heo and toward his own heart.

She initially reacted with silence.

“…”

She then lowered her hands from below her neck, lowered her head, and lowered her shoulders with a sigh.

"…"

But even as she hung her head, she smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

…Why…

Harakawa thought to himself.

…Why are you giving me that look, Heo Thunderson?

He felt like he knew why, but he had another thought as well: *You're simply afraid of having your environment change again.*

Just as people could adapt to unhappiness and accept it as normal, people could adapt to happiness as well.

…You should do the latter.

At that point, Harakawa wondered if that was what he had thought while speaking with Ooki earlier.

He did not know.

He had not settled his thoughts at that point.

Even now, he simply thought it was best for Heo if she went along with this and left the country.

"…"

He heard someone sigh.

It was Heo.

She finally opened her downturned mouth.

"H-Harakawa."

She leaned toward him a bit and gently clenched her hands near her chest.

She then looked up and their gazes met. She tensed her shoulders as if demanding something, but…

“Yes. Don’t worry. I will do my best in my new home.”

Only then did she finally straighten up.

Her lowered eyebrows rose a bit and supported the smile in her eyes.

“So you do your best at opening a bookstore.”

He froze in place when he heard that.

…How does she know about that?

Without even thinking, he realized it had to have been his mother.

But by that time, she had lowered her head.

“Thank you very much.”

Before he could say anything, she turned around and opened the door.

The wind blew, the night air entered, and her orange and blue form vanished outside.

He could see outside for just a moment. He saw the woman named Diana waving toward Ooki who left on a bicycle, the black car, and Heo rushing toward it.

“…”

The door closed.

By the time his hand reached the doorknob, he heard the car starting up.

By the time he turned the doorknob, he heard the car leaving to the left.

And so he stopped moving.

All that remained was the air that had grown as motionless as him.

Chilly night air washed over Shinjou.

She was just outside the entrance of IAI Headquarters.

She had left the reference room for a single reason.

“I need to cool my head a little. There’s just been so much that I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

The automatic door into the lobby closed behind her and she sighed when she heard it.

Sibyl had contacted them earlier. Japanese UCAT was fighting back against American UCAT and they had retaken up to the third basement. There had been gunfire in the background and Sibyl’s voice had sounded exhausted but delighted as she had said the following:

“By the time the two of you return, we will definitely have taken it all back. That is our duty as caretakers.”

“Please do,” Sayama had said before ending the call.

Everyone was working hard and, just as Sibyl had said, the fight to retrieve the facility was theirs.

And there was something else Shinjou and Sayama had to do here.

“So we can’t rush this and lose sight of our job.”

She said it aloud to drive it home.

She faced forward. She was just outside the white building’s entrance.

She saw the roundabout in front of the building and a large fountain that was not currently running.

There was light illuminating the large IAI building, but that light seemed to be absorbed by the night, the mountains, and the forest.

She gently spread her arms and walked into the wind that brought the chill of the air to her.

Beyond the fountain, she saw a lawn and then the runway and mountains.

Sayama was currently gathering a few more documents, but after that, they would wait for the periodic report and head out.

"Are we returning so soon?"

…I hope everyone is okay.

She looked up into the dark sky and the white IAI building.

It's so big, she thought before lowering her gaze once more. A few vending machines were located along the building's wall to the right. They may have been for those who drove to work and they were covered by a canvas roof.

Both to calm herself and as a favor to Sayama who was working down below, she thought it would be nice to buy some drinks.

She turned to the right and approached the machines. She brushed a hand through her hair while making sure not to knock out Mukiti's flower. The night air entered through her hair and chilled her spine and the back of her head.

The touch of the chilly air helped calm her a little. Or at least she thought it did.

…What should I do?

She muttered the question in her heart, but the answer came from her mouth.

"I guess I'll go to Sakai."

Once the athletic festival ended, the midterm exams began. After that was the school festival. She would have to go during the preparations for the school festival, but she was worried the others would resent her for that.

She was interested in the preparations for the greatest of Taka-Akita Academy's bizarre festivals, but some things were more important.

After all, there would be another school festival the following year. Assuming the world still existed in some form or another, that is.

She understood her search for her parents was not actually related to the Leviathan Road. From the perspective of the Leviathan Road, they had made their trip here to pursue Shinjou Kaname as a member of the National Defense Department.

Sayama had also gathered information on Professor Kinugasa for future use.

After confirming his death, their research on Shinjou Kaname was as good as complete.

…So searching for his granddaughter is my personal issue.

"I wonder if I can ask Sayama-kun to come along," she said while stepping up to a vending machine.

She pulled a pink change purse from her pocket and pulled out 120 yen.

However…

"Oh, it's only 100 yen. That's a good price."

She smiled and inserted the 100 yen. She heard the coin fall and the LCD screen next to the coin slot lit up with a message.

"No getting it back now."

A very bad feeling entered her heart, so Shinjou immediately launched an attack on the coin return lever. But…

“Why isn’t it returning my money?”

She repeated her attack a second and third time before looking at the coin return lever. The bottom of the lever had a warning printed on a silver foil sticker. She read it aloud.

“ ‘This is actually a no-return acceptance lever. Too bad.’ This was a trap!!”

As if reacting to her shout, the LCD screen displayed a new message.

“Don’t worry about it!!”

She reflexively slammed her hand against the machine but only received an aching hand for her trouble.

“Fine then,” she said while lowering her shoulders and checking the drink options starting from the upper left. “Freshly Squeezed Mackerel. My Sweat – Lemon Flavor. Hot Yogurt. Drinkable Cheese. …Is this full of test products?”

“5, 4, 3.”

The LCD screen suddenly began a countdown. Sensing danger, she hesitated for one last moment, realized they were all the same, and frantically slammed her palm against the “random” button.

A slapping sound filled the air, a can could be heard falling through the machine, and it finally came out on the bottom.

She picked up the can.

“Indometacin Tea.”

“Winner!!”

Eh? she wondered as the vending machine lit up in front of her. Smoke blasted from it, it opened up, decorative lights popped out, and a multicolored relay of lights flashed as it played the Warship March.

It then spat out another can. She cried out and managed the catch the can in midair.

“Iced Mitsumame Soda?”

She decided to give that one to Sayama and sighed. But as she lowered her shoulders and looked forward again, she noticed something.

“Why haven’t the lights stopped?”

She saw numbers moving along the LCD screen. Two sevens were lined up next to each other and it was vertically cycling through several numbers to the right. Soon, the speed dropped, another seven came down from the upper right, and…

“Noooo! Don’t get another one!!”

As Shinjou shouted and hit the machine over and over, the seven passed by.

“Ahh.”

Thank goodness, she thought with another sigh.

Her shoulders lowered in relief, but then the seven at the bottom of the screen ended its feint and hopped back up into place. The decorative lights all flashed, the Ride of the Valkyries played as a fanfare, and Shinjou…

“Nwaaaaah!!”

“Winnnnnneeeeeeeeerrrrrrr!!”

“N-no! This isn’t a joke anymore!!”

“Isn’t it great!?”

“No, it isn’t! Why aren’t you listening!? And stop!!”

“No stopping it now!!”

Can after can shot out like a waterfall and piled up at her feet with countless heavy metallic sounds.

She cried out, stepped back, and looked around while trying to figure out what to do.

“A-a trash can! I need a trash can!”

終わりの7日

She held her hands forward and hurriedly looked behind her. That was when she noticed something.

Someone was standing on the edge of the runway past the roundabout and the lawn.

A girl in a black men's suit stood alone in the night.

Shinjou recognized her.

"Toda Mikoku-san?"

After speaking her name, Shinjou waited for Mikoku to respond.

However, Mikoku said nothing, as if speaking her name was completely natural.

She simply stood there with her bag over her right shoulder.

…She's part of the Army, right?

This was certainly the girl Gyes had described and even drawn a portrait of.

Shinjou wondered what to do and was suspicious of Mikoku's presence, but then she recalled her own situation. She had no weapons.

However, another thought came to her.

…She isn't a bad person, right?

That may not have been the right thing to think about someone who had defeated one of 3rd-Gear's Hecatoncheires.

However, she calmed her breathing. Whatever the case, she had to keep the girl from moving and she could only wait for Sayama to come out as she was unarmed.

As she began to move, she thought about buying time and also about communicating.

She picked something off the ground and held it out toward Mikoku.

“U-um, Toda Mikoku-san? Do you want some…Eround Tea? …Why does this can have a picture of me on it!?”

“Is it a region-limited character product?”

“Who made this!? …And why is the answer so obvious!?”

She began to carry the can inside the building to complain to the culprit, but…

“Where are you going, Shinjou Sadagiri?”

Mikoku walked over to her.

Having her name called and the speed of the girl caused Shinjou to shrink back.

She froze in place and Mikoku’s footsteps filled the air as she approached but then stopped.

The two of them came to a stop with the fountain in between them.

And…

“Sorry I kept you waiting, Shinjou-kun. I had Miyako-kun create a philosopher’s stone of a weakened 5th concept. It is a handheld optical stealth concept, so now I can place hidden cameras more easily. Now we only need to wait for Kazami’s report and then return to Tok-…”

The entrance’s automatic door opened and Sayama stepped out with two travel bags.

When he saw the two girls, he stopped and faced Mikoku.

He did not hesitate. His eyes narrowed for just a moment and he turned back to Shinjou the next moment. He then gave an expressionless nod.

“So to sum it up, you won a lot of Eround Tea, didn’t you?”

“No!! Well, actually yes!! But the problem is over there!”

She pointed the hand holding some documents toward the fountain.

“Look! It’s someone from the Army!”

Mikoku watched Shinjou.

Shinjou waved the can of tea in her hand and spoke to Sayama who had exited the building.

“Do you see her!? You do, don’t you!? In a way, this is our first real contact with someone from the Army! You don’t see this every day!”

This is a lot like a scene from that exploration party show on Wednesdays, thought Mikoku. *Wasn’t last week’s episode about searching for the cameraman who went on ahead of them into the depths of the unexplored Amazon? Shino was really getting into it, but I did not think they would really find Team Leader Kazami.*

Meanwhile, Sayama raised his hands a bit as Shinjou shouted an explanation at him.

“Calm down,” he said while pointing his palms at her. “It is dangerous over there, so come over here.”

“Oh, sure.”

Shinjou turned her back and started toward Sayama.

“Wait,” called Mikoku on reflex.

Shinjou jumped and stopped while Sayama raised his head to look toward Mikoku.

His gaze could only be called sharp as it pointed directly at her. She did not hesitate to accept it head on and she showed no fear as his gaze almost seemed to audibly pierce through her.

“I have something to tell Shinjou.”

“To tell me?”

Shinjou timidly looked over her shoulder, but Mikoku did not turn toward her. Her mind turned focused on her right hand which held her sword and bag. She made sure she could grab the cloth cover and draw the sword at any moment.

However, something stopped her intent to fight: Shinjou’s voice and anxiously lowered eyebrows.

“Why me? And…who are you?”

“Someone who knows a lot that you do not.”

Silence fell.

But Mikoku did not remove her gaze from Sayama. She saw Shinjou stiffen out of the corner of her eye, but she could not focus on her with an enemy present.

But she did notice that Shinjou gently held her own body, lowered the ends of her eyebrows, and opened her mouth.

Mikoku knew more or less what question was coming from Shinjou who had lost her memories.

…She will ask if I know about her.

Just as she thought about replying that she did know, the mouth directly in front of her gaze opened.

“Toda Mikoku. Don’t tell me you too are the type that checks on certain things by tugging on them.”

“What? You ‘too’? And tug on what?”

“Waaaah!!”

Shinjou frantically waved her hands and stirred up the air around her. She faced Mikoku with some anger in her expression.

“N-nothing! Don’t let the words of a crazy person fool you!”

“Shinjou-kun, whose side are you on? More importantly, Toda Mikoku. Leave.”

He pointed to the forest behind her.

“Shinjou-kun and I are extremely busy. If you have something to say, make an appointment first. Call IAI and say you wish to speak with the emperor of the universe. That will get you transferred to UCAT’s complaints department.”

“Shinjou, is this boy always like this?”

“He’s usually a lot worse.”

She felt somewhat sympathetic.

How sad, she thought. *If only she had someone as normal as me nearby. Then she would not have so much trouble.*

And so she spoke with Shinjou still in the corner of her eye.

“Shinjou.” She took in a breath. “Nothing I say to you now will get through to you and it is better if you know nothing. That is why I beg you to take this one thing to heart: could you perhaps leave UCAT while you still know nothing?”

“…”

“All of this… All of this comes down to our fight with UCAT.”

“Wh-why would you say that!? Why do I have to leave?”

Mikoku answered Shinjou’s question without preparing the words ahead of time. She spoke in a dignified voice so the girl could hear.

“Because you are someone who should not be involved in the fighting. This is for the sake of the world’s future.”

That is the role I’m trying to have Shino bear, she thought.

And then she continued.

“The reason for this is only known by us and a few within UCAT. …And it is best if you do not know.”

Sayama watched Mikoku’s face.

Her eyes were sharply narrowed and she pushed back his gaze.

But he spoke up without hesitation.

“Let me ask one thing. Was Shinjou-kun on your side?”

Shinjou’s shoulders trembled at that. If Mikoku answered yes, it would mean Shinjou had belonged to the Army, their enemy.

But Mikoku shook her head.

“No. Shinjou’s parents did not wish for that. Neither did we or UCAT. But I know Shinjou. That is all that matters.” She shrugged. “I am not about to give you any proof, but I do not change gender. I know Shinjou from before she lost her memories, but that is all.”

“I…see.”

Shinjou's voice spilled to the ground with some disappointment mixed in. She had likely been hoping to find someone else of her same race.

And so Sayama spoke to Mikoku in order to draw out some information to dispel Shinjou's discouragement.

"I see. In other words, that warning was a personal one removed from our positions as the Army or UCAT."

"That is a valid way of looking at this."

"I see. Then…"

This is what that meant.

"To sum up, you are unable to forget Shinjou-kun, you casually approached her in Kurashiki, and you came all this way to see her. You are quite the stalker. …Now, listen carefully."

He took a breath and pointed at Mikoku.

"Shinjou-kun hates perverts like that. You disgust me."

A can crashed into his forehead.

He heard the heavy sound of the drink inside and his vision filled with darkness for an instant.

However, the light soon returned and he saw the sky and the can that had bounced off his head.

…Hot Eround Tea.

He could not let that fall on the ground, so he recovered in an instant, grabbed the can in midair, opened it, and took a drink. It was delicious and it woke him up. Shinjou was smiling on the printed label. He was glad he had secretly photographed her for this.

“Excellent.”

“S-Sayama-kun? What exactly is ‘excellent’?”

“That is simple, Shinjou-kun. Your warm liquid is so incredibly delicious that-…”

“Don’t say it like that while rubbing your cheek against it!!”

Shinjou shouted at him, but her shoulders drooped in exhaustion and she turned her head to look at Mikoku.

“Thank you for the warning, but I am a member of UCAT.”

“I know that and I have no intention of recruiting you into the Army. But remember this: your parents did not want you to be on either side and you would be honoring their decision if you stopped fighting.”

“Why? Why am I in that kind of position?”

Shinjou’s question filled the night air and she tilted her head toward Mikoku.

“Who were my parents? Do you happen to know Shinjou Yukio?”

“Well…”

Just as Mikoku was trying to decide whether to agree or disagree, Sayama felt a slight wind to his left. The wind was blowing toward Mikoku.

That wind contained the color red.

The red was a women’s suit worn by…

“Gyes-kun!!”

Gyes ran.

She had thought carrying Sayama and Shinjou's travel bags to the main entrance was a job for the Moirai, but she was glad she had gone through with it without complaining. She had never expected this.

"I have determined I am fortunate to receive this chance for revenge!!"

She shot past Sayama's right side and then Shinjou's right side.

The fountain lay between her and the enemy, but she did not hesitate to step over the fountain's stone edge. Travelling over the water was the quickest route.

She rerouted the same amount of gravitational control used to control one of her swords and opened it below her feet to support her body on the surface of the water.

She kicked off the flat surface of the deactivated fountain.

She charged onward while bending backwards.

Nine swords expanded from the bottom of her suit.

"Ohhh!"

By the time she crossed the fountain and swung her body forward in midair, she was within five meters of Mikoku.

She moved her arms like wings and beat the air with her spread fingers to move ever onward.

The swords crashed toward Mikoku.

One swung toward her head from the upper left, one swung toward her right shoulder from the upper right, one was thrown toward her neck from the upper right, one flew toward the empty air to the left to prevent her from evading, one swept horizontally toward her side from the right, one swung diagonally down toward the hand holding her bag from the left side, one jabbed toward her stomach from the left side, and one jabbed toward her waist from the right side.

Mikoku fell back. That avoided all but the jabs and the throw and she likely planned to draw her sword before those attacks caught up.

And that was exactly what she did.

She took a large leap backwards.

Mikoku showed her skill by throwing her bag forward before drawing the sword.

The jabs to the side and waist were obstructed by the bag, so only the throw to the neck remained.

"…!"

But she swung her head to avoid that last attack.

She stopped falling back and drew her sword.

Gyes was still in midair and she determined Mikoku planned to target her just before she landed.

"You fell for it!"

"!?"

Gyes shouted back at Mikoku's confused voice.

"How many swords did I attack with? Did you count them!? There were eight!"

She had one left and she drew it from where it was hidden behind her back.

She threw a single-handed strike while leaping forward.

Meanwhile, Mikoku stuck with her counterattack. She did not step back to gain enough space to attack after Gyes landed. She instead stepped forward to fill what gap there was.

…Is she that confident in her sword technique!?

A moment later, Gyes smiled.

“I have determined that is the case!”

If this girl was skilled enough drive back Aigaion, she would view Gyes, another of the Hecatoncheires, on the same level.

Having predicted that with high probability, Gyes went in for her true attack.

She tossed her raised sword into the air.

Mikoku frowned and that was exactly what Gyes had predicted would happen.

And while acting in accordance with her predictions, Gyes grabbed the empty air with her right hand.

“Come!”

With those words, something did indeed arrive.

It was a sword, but it was far too large.

A giant blade measuring eight meters appeared in the air.

Holding the hilt and swinging it down was a giant red arm synched with the movements of Gyes’s own arm.

This was Gyes’s god of war.

As soon as she landed, she sank down and slammed her right hand against the ground.

Her automaton palm tore into the asphalt and a spray of asphalt shot into the air. At the same time, the giant blade sliced through the roaring wind as it swung down toward Mikoku.

It was going to hit.

But just before it did, Mikoku did something else.

“…!”

She threw her sword toward Gyes.

When faced with this sudden action, Gyes’s artificial mind chose to evade.

…Oh, no!

Her failure had been in not releasing her self-preservation limiter.

She had not been prepared to go down with her enemy and that had resulted in this automatic evasion as a machine.

“!”

Her body tilted to the left and Mikoku’s sword grazed her right cheek and flew behind her.

And the sword wielded by Gyes’s god of war slipped to the left.

It fell as if tearing through the air to Mikoku’s left.

With a great roar, the giant sword tore apart the asphalt.

However, Mikoku still lived. In fact, she was unharmed and still moving.

She first spun her body around, reached into the air, and grabbed one of Gyes’s swords that had previously fallen to the ground. The tremor in the ground from the god of war’s attack had knocked it back into the air.

Her hand began a snapping motion as if to throw the sword toward Gyes. Meanwhile, Gyes was crouching down after landing and she was in the process of releasing all of her gravitational control to prepare for its next use. In short, she could not immediately move.

…What have I done!?

That thought was immediately followed by a sudden change to Mikoku's expression. Her eyes opened wide.

"…!?"

She let go of the sword, raised the lightened hand in front of her, and grabbed something in the air.

"A new enemy!?"

With that shout, she leaped backwards.

She held something in her hand. It was what had stopped the attack against Gyes and caused Mikoku to fall back.

It was a single silver fork. However, it was a promotional anime product, so the handle was pink.

…Is that…?

Gyes turned and found two people standing in the entrance. One was Miyako and the other held her arms toward Gyes.

"Moira 1st."

"I borrowed that from Lady Miyako, but I cannot fire it well on my own."

The automaton narrowed her eyes in a smile as she spoke and Gyes heard the footsteps of Mikoku falling back even further.

Gyes tried to stand and pursue, but Miyako stopped her.

"Calm down, Gyes. This isn't someone you can defeat if you rush things. And this is their problem right now."

Miyako pointed forward but not at Gyes.

She pointed at Sayama and Shinjou.

Mikoku threw away the fork and ran backwards.

The asphalt below her feet turned to grass and then the runway.

She saw Gyes's god of war vanish and she saw Sayama and Shinjou run around the fountain and next to Gyes.

"What is the Army thinking!?" asked Sayama. "What are you thinking!?"

She could not exactly answer that. *What are you asking?* she thought, but that seemed funny to her.

She took a breath and showed her teeth in a smile.

"Do you not get it!? Do you understand nothing!? …You're a lot like you're father, Sayama Mikoto, son of Sayama Asagi."

Those words scored a direct hit.

Sayama's blank expression broke a bit. He frowned and the look in his eyes grew sharp.

"Why do you know my father's name?"

"Do you really think I am going to answer that? If you want to know, then pursue the past. Although you might find something that makes you want to stop partway. …But if you can overcome that, then you will see the flow of history that everyone has chosen to ignore!"

She took a breath.

"And Shinjou, let me tell you what I failed to say a moment before. This information could lead to good or bad."

"Wh-what are you-…?"

“I refer to your parents. They were both members of UCAT.”

She spoke as if throwing the words away, but she saw Shinjou’s eyes open wide.

It was a look of surprise. However, it was a joyous surprise, not a fearful one.

…So she is happy to hear her parents were members of UCAT.

She momentarily closed her eyes to think on that fact and she gave herself over to running.

A moment later, she jumped past the runway and toward the forest.

She then heard the roar of something slicing through the air.

Just as Shinjou’s mouth opened to ask a question, something caught Mikoku’s airborne body from the side.

The object snatched her away in midair.

“Alex!”

It was a mechanical dragon.

Previously, the steel color of his mechanical body had been exposed, but he was now colored red, white, and blue. She was surrounded by a barrier of air he held and she shouted down below even as they began to ascend.

“We will next meet on the battlefield!”

Down below, the large white structure grew more distant.

The two people standing before it also grew smaller and the surrounding scenery came into view.

Her field of vision rose and she realized they were rising into the sky.

“Mikoku! Down below!”

Alex spoke while ascending with a roar of wind and Mikoku looked back down.

She searched for something different from before that would make Alex cry out.

“Is that…?”

Someone stood on the roof of the giant white building.

It was a well-built middle-aged gentleman in a white suit. His hair was slicked back and his likeable eyes and mouth were turned toward them. Even though it was night, he made a show of placing a hand over his eyes as he looked up. It was as if he were seeing them off.

“Who is that?”

Mikoku answered Alex without looking away from the man below.

She sat on the mechanical dragon’s back inside the barrier that protected her from the atmospheric pressure.

“He was once one of our enemies. But from what we have seen, he seems to have lost all will to fight.”

She crossed her arms and looked up into the night sky. It felt like her view stretched on forever.

“His name is Izumo Retsu. He is currently IAI’s executive manager, but he was the leader of Japanese UCAT during the Great Kansai Earthquake.”

“I see. More importantly, we must hurry back, Mikoku. Tatsumi has contacted us. Word has reached the harbor that some kind of large object is traveling through the ocean near Tokyo Bay. Most likely, that woman and the automaton who threw the fork at you were on their way to inform that Sayama and Shinjou of the same thing.”

“In that case…”

Alex’s words were brief.

“Tokyo will soon be the site of a battle between a mechanical dragon and the evil organization of UCAT.”

It chose to move.

Its evolution was progressing smoothly and it had developed beyond what could be called necessary. It had used that evolution to overcome the subconscious wariness that came from a past it did not remember.

Even if someone had fought back against it in the past and even if that person had harmed it, it had surpassed all that with its current evolution.

But it also wondered if this sense of superiority was nothing but self-conceit. Was it simply relying on its own predictions and not looking at reality?

But it made a further decision. It used its predictions to their fullest to create the greatest enemy it could imagine and evolved to oppose such an enemy.

When evolving, it had to choose one of two basic types of mechanical dragon.

One was a non-transforming type that could somewhat alter the position of the exterior over its primary framework to create a generic form that could both fly and fight. As the frame did not change shape, it was more durable, but its abilities in flight and combat were lacking as it had elements of both built in.

The other was a fully transforming type that could transform the primary framework and fully transform the exterior to create two distinct forms for flight and combat. As the frame was made to come apart, it was less durable, but it could produce great mobility and attack power. The main problem was the lack of defensive power.

It chose the former.

It had a reason: its giant form. It was large and therefore needed durability to maintain its body. And so it was born as a non-transforming type.

As it evolved, it needed to strengthen its weaponry to handle large enemies and to thicken its armor and strengthen its accelerators to handle smaller enemies that would attack and immediately withdraw.

However, it wondered if it would be defeated and injured using that method. It was the failure of that method that had sent it to the bottom of that water and set its evolution going once more.

It then found another answer.

Its previous evolution had not been wrong. It had simply lacked something.

It wanted to move once it had gathered everything.

"…"

It moved through the ocean.

It moved to fight. It moved for the sake of the people that should have been by its side but were not.

All the while, it wondered where those people had gone.

It was not the humans who first noticed the change.

A large white facility existed in Kanda, a portion of Tokyo's center. The automatons in the underground facility spotted a single philosopher's stone reading on the radar.

"Reading detected! At this size, it is almost certainly Black Sun! Activating experimental large-scale concept space creation device!!"

A moment later, a long, shallow V-shaped concept space opened from Tokyo Bay to the Chuo Expressway and from the Chofu Interchange, along National Route 20, and to Okutama.

At the same time, the American UCAT mechanical dragon unit deployed to Tokyo Bay ascended into the sky.

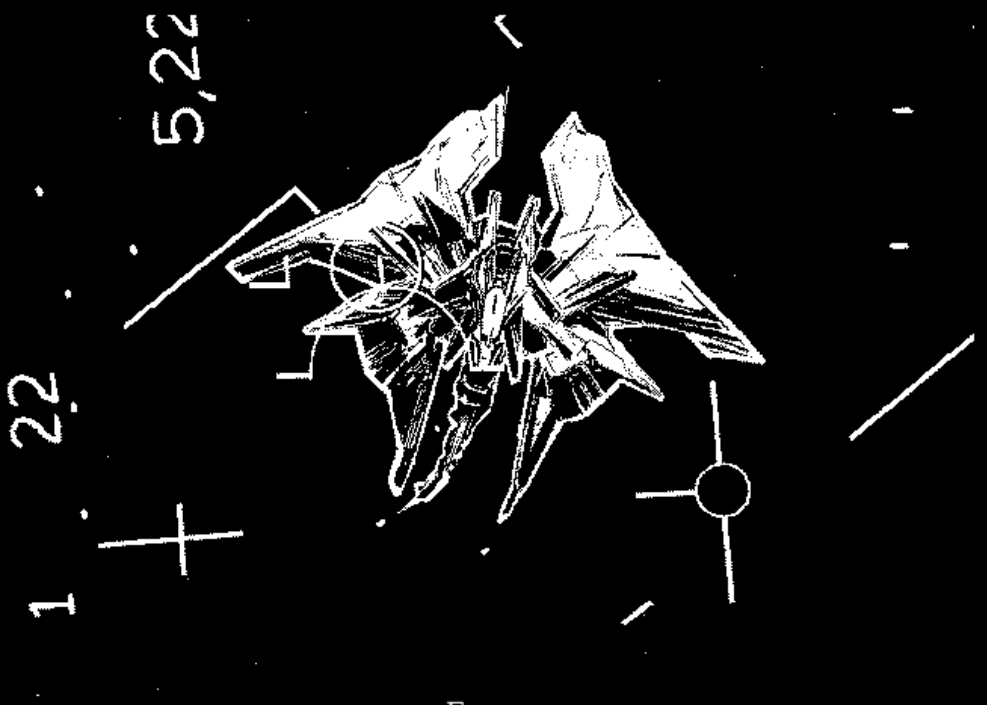
A giant object was already flying into the air above the ocean while surrounded by massive amounts of water.

It was a black mechanical dragon over three hundred meters long.

Chapter 25: Desired Sky

Chapter 25

“Desired Sky”



Fun
This is fun
It is so much fun here

Fun

This is fun

It is so much fun here

The blue mechanical dragons of American UCAT sought battle over Tokyo Bay.

Six of the twelve ascended and they formed three-craft units named A and B. Units C and D where in charge of attacking from the surface.

When a dark form entered the nighttime bay from the east, Unit A approached from the northern sky and Unit B from an arc skimming just above the southern water's surface.

The large black mechanical dragon was moving slowly. It travelled west at an altitude of approximately five hundred meters.

The commander of Unit A spoke up while approaching it from the upper left.

His voice did not travel over electromagnetic radio. To lessen the burden on the large-scale concept space creation device in Kanda, the concept space contained no concept allowing electromagnetic communication.

Kanda was also developing a concept space communication device which would allow the use of radios even with all sorts of concept jamming in effect, but it was still in the experimental phase.

For that reason, they used optical radios that transmitted signals using the rapid flashing of small lights.

And so the flying mechanical dragons spoke with those voices of light.

"Cross over."

While Unit A was approaching from the upper left, Unit B was approaching from the lower right and their commander spoke up in response.

“Testament.”

The six dragons had transformed into their aircraft forms and they twisted toward the black dragon in groups of three.

Unit A flew from the upper left to lower right of the large black mechanical dragon.

Unit B flew from the lower right to the upper left.

A moment later, Units C and D launched a preemptive strike from the harbor. To support Units A and B’s attack, they were drawing the black dragon’s attention just before the attack.

The simultaneous attacks sounded like a single explosive noise.

The ground unit had also prepared some tanks.

The six mechanical dragons on the surface fired their dragon cannons from their mouths and the tanks fired several hundred concept-modified steel shells into the air.

They hit.

The clear sound of impact was joined by overlapping shockwaves. Armor-piercing, heat piercing, and other special concept shells struck the black dragon’s nose and shoulders.

“_____!”

A continuous roar filled the air and explosions lit the sky.

That was when Units A and B crossed paths.

The unmoving lights of concept space Tokyo colored their intersection.

They flipped past each other at about six hundred meters in front of the large black mechanical dragon.

The commanders fired their dragon cannons, the second-in-commands fired their air-to-surface missiles and let inertia carry them, and the third member of both units primarily scanned everything around them to pick up the effects of all the attacks in real time.

By the time the intersecting attack ended, the six blue dragons had passed by the black one.

They scattered.

The three members of Unit A scattered toward the ocean below and the three members of Unit B scattered into the sky above. They flew in swift arcs to avoid being attacked and they gathered into groups of three once more.

While they once more began to pursue the black dragon, Unit A's commander spoke up.

"How's the enemy?"

He looked to the black mechanical dragon that flew through the sky with explosive flames wrapped around it like a cloud.

"Slight damage to the armor. An invisible defensive field surrounding it deflected even the dragon cann-…"

The voice coming from Unit A's third member vanished.

Everyone saw something red in the position his dragon had been.

Due to their relative speed, that something seemed to be slowly tumbling and breaking to pieces. It was the wreckage of a blue mechanical dragon and the flames of an explosion.

It had been hit by some attack none of them had seen.

And the enemy had targeted the third member which had not attacked it.

They all felt a chill and realized something.

A wild beast would always attack the weakest prey first.

And a wild beast would make an example of the weak to rule over the others.

Unit A's commander made a split-second decision and shouted out.

"Unit B, break! You too, ground unit! The enemy might be scanning the data from our attacks! Get away from the weapons that had the least effect!"

The people he was addressing responded.

And they did so with bright explosions.

One appeared in the sky and eleven rose up from the wharf in the distance.

Those were the third member of Unit B and the tanks on the wharf.

Smoke rose while wrapped in flames, but not so much as a scream was heard. When using electromagnetic communications, destruction brought static, but here there was only the fire.

But then each unit commander received a communication. It was the last information the third members of Units A and B had managed to get off as they broke apart and sank. That information gave the identity of the enemy attack.

"Black light?"

That was something that should not exist. It was an optical weapon that could not be seen at night.

The black mechanical dragon had fired from all of the cannons hidden over its body. It had most likely fired from its mouth as well.

And then it accelerated. Its body shrank down for an instant and it extended in the next instant.

“…!”

It let out a cry and moved forward to the harbor where more weak prey was gathered.

“Pursue!”

The remnants of Units A and B merged into a single four-craft unit and pursued the black dragon.

While facing the burning harbor, that black dragon used its acceleration to shake off the flames surrounding it.

Once it was visible again, Unit B’s second-in-command described what he saw.

“It’s unharmed.”

He gasped as he said it, but Unit B’s commander replied.

“No. Our third told us there was light damage to the armor and that’s more than anyone managed sixty years ago. We don’t know how much it can accelerate, but we do know we can draw its attention and damage it.”

Lights flew up from within the flames on the harbor.

They belonged to the mechanical dragons of Units C and D as they drew arcs through the sky on a direct path to the enemy.

But all of the blue dragons saw the black one lower its head a little while still raising its speed.

“…!”

Its dragon cannon fired from its mouth like a waterfall of black light.

But it was not targeting the mechanical dragons that were arriving from the harbor.

“Damn that thing!!”

The attack swept across the harbor in an instant.

It pierced through the moored cargo ships being used as barricades like they were made of paper.

The black light roasted all the equipment, weapons, and everything else prepared on the wharf and the impact blasted them into the sky.

The sound of spraying water rushed from left to right.

And it was after a slight delay that the explosions and destruction from shockwaves arrived.

That too swept from left to right while blasting rubble, wreckage, and pillars of water into the sky.

The pillars of destruction easily reached three hundred meters. Afterwards, the cars from the cargo ships and fifty meter square warehouse roofs poured down like rain.

Beyond all the damage, no cover remained. There was only a thick sea of tall flames.

And the city was visible past those flames. It was empty as this was inside the concept space, but that nightscape had been created by human hands.

The black mechanical dragon accelerated toward those nighttime lights.

As it continued on, the blue mechanical dragons pursued and Unit A’s commander transformed. The legs narrowed its wings, the head extended out, and the entire body grew longer and more slender.

“All units, transform into high-speed cruising form and continue the mission. Pursue the-…”

He changed his wording.

“Shoot down the enemy.”

Movement filled an underground space.

A white corridor had the characters B2F on the wall.

This was the underground portion of Japanese UCAT. The corridor ended at a large explosion-resistant door which said “New Headquarters” in black, block letters.

However, the door was opened, so those two words were split to the left and right.

Inside that place which functioned as the new center of Japanese UCAT, a voice proclaimed what was occurring there. The Japanese voice sounded exhausted and out of breath.

“Is this the final battle!?”

With that, gunshots raced across the room. Those inside the headquarters wore blue armored uniforms and those rushing inside wore white uniforms. A few of each were knocked aside by the gunfire, but the remaining ones chose a clash.

The white fired and continued running while the blue returned fire.

None of them evaded.

“You idiots!” shouted the middle-aged commander at the head of the white group. He spoke in English. “We intercepted your optical transmissions, so we know Black Sun has appeared in Tokyo Bay!”

He received a response in Japanese.

The American UCAT commander shouted back while firing a submachine gun from the top-level terrace.

“Our job is to protect this place no matter what happens! If you don’t like that, then change it!”

“If you understand that much, then prepare yourselves!”

The two of them ran toward each other, faced each other, and prepared their weapons. They then shouted a single word in unison.

“Testament!”

They both fired their submachine guns one last time.

They were only three meters apart and gunfire filled the air as they simultaneously pulled the trigger at such close range.

The man from Japanese UCAT held his gun in his right hand and covered his face with his left. The bullets were deflected by his elbow and gouged into the ceiling behind him.

However, the man from American UCAT did not. He tried to raise his armored arm to protect himself, but he found it would not move.

He checked and saw his uniform’s actuator had been warped from the previous gunfire.

At first, he frowned at the unexpected turn of events, but he instantly realized the bullets flying toward the center of his chest had some kind of concept effect.

“Mock bullets!?”

Once he realized that, he smiled.

He showed his teeth of as if to say this was just perfect.

“Is being this naïve your way of doing things, you yellow apes!? But I will praise you for this!”

He prepared himself to be hit and closed his eyes.

But in that instant, a female voice reached him.

“I have determined that is enough.”

A hand swept in front of the bullets and took the hit in his place.

The sound of something cracking brought everyone to a stop, but the owner of the arm moved their hand.

“This is not a problem. I can move it with my gravitational control.”

When she brought her hand to her chest and bowed, someone muttered her name.

“#8.”

“Testament. I decided to intrude a bit as I owe a debt to American UCAT.”

“Owe a debt? But thanks to the automatons’ shared memory, I’d heard they destroyed you.”

The commander lowered his submachine gun that was out of ammunition and frowned. Meanwhile, #8 shook her head while wearing the shirt and jeans that American UCAT had given her.

“No, unfortunately. After I sent the identity of Colonel Odor’s technique over the shared memory, I entered sleep mode, but after that…”

She looked across everyone and showed off her arm with the bullets embedded in it.

“It seems Colonel Odor caught me as I fell.”

“Then you saved him because…?”

“Testament. I command the automatons, so I saved the life of someone on a similar level. However, this body is only the one I had left in the warehouse, so we are now even. If you wish to enjoy the rest of the battle, please do. In that case, I will work to serve all of you.”

She took a breath.

“Otherwise, please return to your normal jobs. And in that case, I will still provide my assistance. That is my duty as an automaton.”

The battle above Tokyo had already shifted about twenty kilometers back from the front line at Tokyo Bay.

The black mechanical dragon travelled along the concept space corridor continuing to the west.

It may have realized that was the shortest path, it may have thought nothing constituted an obstacle for it, and it may have been able to smash through any wall if it slammed into it, but it chose to simply hurry onward.

The black dragon’s target was the Concept Core inside the Vesper Cannon located at Okutama.

That was the power of its world and it flew based on a sense of smell that resembled a homing instinct.

It simply continued west along the path formed by the concept space corridor.

Pursuing its giant form were the blue mechanical dragons.

Those blue dragons were all less than a tenth the size of the black one. While the black one calmly used its wings to accelerate, the blue ones narrowed their bodies and sliced through the air to pursue.

The number of blue dragons had fallen.

There were only five now.

Unit C had been completely wiped out, Units A and B had their commander and second-in-command, and Unit D only had its second-in-command. Even though those five remained, none of them was undamaged.

However, the same could be said of the black dragon.

Its armor was cracked or even damaged in places.

Unit C had done that damage. Near the intersection of the Chuo Expressway and the Inner Circular Route that made a circuit of Tokyo's city center, Unit C had made an attack while using the raised highway of the Shinjuku region as cover.

The result could be seen in the present situation.

The black dragon's speed had not dropped. In fact, it had risen, as if to say its prey was close.

The pursuing blue dragons flew below the dark sky and above the abandoned expressway.

Among them, Unit D's second-in-command spoke.

"Dammit. Damage to the transformation structure is keeping me from deploying my cannon. If only we could have closed off the end of concept space, we could have focused our attacks on it."

"We can't do that," replied Unit A's commander. "If it managed to break through the wall and into the real world, it would spread chaos across the globe. We need to use the time and distance given by this long concept space to finish it off while it's drawn by the bait."

He continued.

"D2, testament. You can withdraw. …Everyone else, continue."

With that, Unit A's commander, A1, accelerated at the head of the blue group.

“We will now begin stage two of Operation Thunder Dragon.”

As they flew above the expressway, the land near Chofu lay below them.

They saw factories and paddy fields. The collection of lights to the southwest was the area around Keio Chofu Station. A few department stores and buildings were gathered there, so the level ground contained lights and the shadows of structures.

A large area of shadow was located near there.

That was Chofu Airport.

The black mechanical dragon cut past that light and shadow at a height of six hundred meters.

One of the blue mechanical dragons had left, so four remained: A1, A2, B1, and B2.

A1 and B1, the two commanders, flew up into the sky on the left and right. And…

“Hey,” said B1 to A1. “Before entering the concept space, you saw the footage from Yokota, right? Y’know, of the great-granddaughter of that past hero.”

“Yeah, the girl the colonel is protecting. The one who’s been called demon possessed for so long.”

“Will we really be able to tell her she doesn’t need to worry about that anymore?”

“Don’t worry,” replied A1. “The colonel may be scary, but he was worried about us, remember? And we said to leave the front line to us. If we can say that to someone like him, there’s no way we can’t do the same with a girl.”

As they spoke, the two dragons flew in two arcs to reach the sky above either side of the black dragon.

The black dragon then shook slightly as the cannons across its body opened.

That was when light struck it from behind.

A2 had remained behind and fired its dragon cannon.

However, the attack from behind was blocked by the black dragon's defensive field and armor.

The light broke and scattered, but the black dragon was slowed ever so slightly.

A voice filled their cockpits. It was A1's voice.

"Transfer all data control to B2. We need to focus on piloting."

"Testament."

With those words, A1 and B1 shot toward the black mechanical dragon from above.

A1 did not transform. While still in high-speed cruising form, it flew toward the black mechanical dragon's back as if dropping down headfirst.

The roar of wind enveloped the craft and it bent and creaked under the stress.

However, A1 ignored that and accelerated toward the center of the dorsal fin-like armor on the black dragon's back.

In that instant, the black dragon opened up its back.

It revealed a series of cannons. Just as the records from sixty years ago described, sixty-four holes opened on its back as the giant muzzles of cannons.

Black light was already gathering inside them.

In the very instant before they fired, A1 let out a shout.

"Fire!!"

With that, two types of light appeared.

One was the black light fired from the black dragon's back.

The other came from a completely different direction.

In the darkness to the southwest, a tracer round flew from the ground at the Chofu Airport.

The light of the shell revealed a group of ground vehicles including tanks.

The shell struck first.

Light and noise covered the black mechanical dragon's left side and it gave a cry.

It had opened the armor on its back and the armor panels it had moved out of the way were folded up in a number of places on its back. That meant it could not bend its body to escape the damage.

"_____!!"

A creaking sound filled the sky and both A1 and B1 took control of themselves.

On their current path, the black light rising from below would pierce through them, so they slipped aside as if moving from the black dragon's back and to its sides. They then transformed to normal flight form and immediately continued on to combat form.

While transforming, the frame, armor, and spread limbs received the full force of the pressure from the air.

The air slammed into their underside with a sound much like cloth being struck.

The two mechanical dragons used the recoil and air resistance to twist around. They pointed their heads down as if circling around the black dragon on either side.

Like that, they managed to evade the barrage of black light rising toward them.

And they immediately dropped down and really did slip past the black dragon on the left and right.

“_____!”

They continued down toward the expressway flowing by down below.

The black barrage they had evaded curved around in the sky above and pursued them down below.

The black attack split into thirty-two shots on either side and rapidly closed in on the two dragons.

But the dragons hurried down to escape them.

To support them, a second shell from the southwest struck the black dragon in the face.

A roar filled the air and flames rose from the hit, but…

“!”

A dragon cannon shot from the black dragon’s mouth and to the land in the southwest.

It hit and the straight line swept across the dark airport.

With the sound of distant thunder, the formation of combat vehicles was scattered by explosive flames.

All of it was destroyed beyond recognition.

But despite that destruction, A1 had successfully avoided the attack after it.

It slipped past the black light pursuing from overhead and reached the asphalt rushing past at high speed.

Just before colliding with the ground, A1 spread its combat form limbs and slammed itself into the expressway.

The metal smashed the asphalt and the great inertia of its speed caused the blue dragon to slip forward with sounds of destruction.

All of the cockpit's consoles immediately turned red because the damage to every part of its body quickly entered the red zone. It was surprising that a transforming mechanical dragon had lasted even this long.

"This isn't over yet!"

A1 continued to move. It forced its body up, which broke its front, right leg.

Echoing destruction filled the air, the dragon tilted upwards, and it faced straight up.

Just before taking that standing pose, A1's nose targeted the black mechanical dragon's belly.

And it transformed.

It shifted to normal flight form, purged the parts that did not survive the process, and threw all of its strength into acceleration.

It floated up for an instant before beginning to sink back down under its weight, but then…

"Go!"

The blue dragon slipped past the black barrage coming from overhead and forced itself to ascend.

Its front, right leg fell off and one shot of black light smashed the secondary cannon on its shoulder.

However, it did not stop.

It shot past the black dragon's left side and circled around into the sky.

It twisted around and pointed down.

The black mechanical dragon's back lay there. The series of cannons there contained no light after having fired the previous barrage and the armor had been removed to expose those cannons.

Light was gathering in the blue mechanical dragon's mouth.

But even with this dragon cannon, the enemy's defensive field meant a straight-on shot was needed.

And so A1 made a half rotation to point its head straight down.

It made a single downward acceleration because it was unlikely it could withstand any more than that given its level of damage.

The black dragon responded by slowly gathering black light in those cannons again and by opening a few new areas of armor. Small cannons jutted out to fire back at the blue dragon.

However, something else did not allow that counterattack.

To interrupt the black dragon's preparations to fire, a great impact shook the entire dragon and caused it to float up a bit.

Something had crashed into it from below: B1.

A1 could not see from its location, but B1 had likely collided with the black dragon's belly and was now clinging to it. It then began tearing into the armor panels with its legs.

"…!"

B1 roared and white light sprayed from the black dragon's belly.

B1 had fired at point blank range.

The black dragon clearly twisted its body, let out a cry, and shook its wings.

A moment later, a few colors other than white spread from its belly: red and black.

The mixture formed explosive flames of destruction.

B1's roar and white light had vanished and it went without saying what had become of them.

However, A1 did not hesitate.

While facing downwards, it accelerated into a power dive that far outdid gravitational acceleration.

And then…

"…!?"

A disturbance came over A1's movement. It shook and strayed a bit from its downward path.

That was when it saw what remained in the sky behind it where A2 and B2 should have been.

"Were they shot down!?"

Only two trails of smoke remained in the dark sky there. The wreckage was likely on the expressway far behind.

The shaking of its body had come from the loss of B2 which had been handling its central control. Inside A1's cockpit, Unit A's commander switched over to full manual control. That meant he could not use the targeting system, but…

"I can aim by sight!"

With that shout, he finished switching everything over.

However, the slight time lag proved fatal. The lessened acceleration had allowed black light to gather in the cannons down below. They were not fully charged yet, but it was enough to fire.

“Dammit!”

As if to drown out his shout, the black barrage rose with the density of a wall.

He would be shot down.

But in that instant, another blue form descended next to A1 at even greater speed.

“D2!? I ordered you to withdraw!”

“Well, you see, the damage to my craft’s transformation structure has me stuck in high-speed cruising form.”

The man continued speaking before he could be stopped.

“Go on ahead. …And make sure you and the others get the praise of that demon-possessed girl.”

The pointed front end of the blue mechanical dragon designated D2 charged into the black barrage.

It was less like a direct hit and more like an inevitable strike that destroyed D2.

The blue dragon broke apart and its pieces scattered everywhere, but it still created a path. There was now an empty gap in the wall of black.

D2 then crashed into the cannons on the black dragon’s back.

In the same way, A1 charged through the opened path in the barrage.

The black mechanical dragon’s back lay directly before it.

The black light was gone and D2’s collision had opened a hole in the cannons.

The black dragon’s internal framework and steel moving parts were visible.

That was A1's target.

It transformed in an instant. In combat form, it accelerated toward the black dragon's back despite its missing front, right leg. Just before hitting, it fired a full blast of its dragon cannon.

And it collided with the larger dragon's back.

A flower bloomed in the sky near the Chofu Interchange on the Chuo Expressway.

It was a giant red flower with a core measuring over three hundred meters.

Its petals were made from explosive flames and the sound of its blooming sounded like a bestial cry.

That flower bloomed in the night sky, but it soon scattered.

Seeds trailed flames and flew through the sky as the flower scattered, but those seeds were the pieces of a black mechanical dragon. Giant pieces of framework and armor fell to the earth and smaller pieces sliced through the wind and scattered everywhere.

The great rumbling arrived later. One great roar acted as proof of the destruction and a chain of scattering fireworks sounds followed.

Once the wind swept the smoke from the air, only one thing remained: the lingering reverberation of destruction.

Nothing concrete remained.

The black mechanical dragon had been destroyed.

Chapter 26: Running Destination

Chapter 26

“Running Destination”

Your heart tells you to go
And your voice wants to say something
“I’m going”

Your heart tells you to go

And your voice wants to say something

"I'm going"

A small room of about eight square meters had an arched roof.

The floor was orange carpet and the walls were covered in wallpaper made of a fairly thick white cloth.

The only furnishings were a sofa and bed affixed to the ground, a television embedded in the wall, and some shelves.

The lights embedded in the ceiling created shadows in front of the door and at the edge of the bed.

Both of those shadows were cast by a person, both of whom were female.

A tall woman in a black suit stood in front of the sliding door and a short girl sat on the edge of the bed.

"Okay, Heo. I will be leaving now, so are you sure you're okay?"

"Y-yes. I can see what's going on using the TV, Mrs. Diana."

"That's right," replied Diana with a smile. She placed a hand on the door behind her. "Don't worry. We just received word that Black Sun was destroyed, remember?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Heo nodded and remained sitting without even removing her jacket.

Seeing that, Diana tilted her head while still smiling.

"You don't believe it?"

“It’s not that. I see no reason for them to lie about it. It’s just…that means there was a battle.”

“Yes, and it seems many lives were lost.”

Heo hung her head when she heard that and Diana continued speaking.

“Feeling sad is a good thing, Heo, but if you are going to actually say something, say thank you. They were fighting to create happiness, not to make people sad.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Despite the sinking tone of Heo’s reply, Diana narrowed and bent her eyes.

“But you probably won’t really understand that until later, so think about this again once you are more certain of your safety and have grown up. …Perhaps after you have children.”

“B-but I’m still a long way from getting married.”

As Heo tensed her shoulders, blushed, and waved her hands back and forth, Diana laughed a bit.

“It’s better for girls to be cute like that instead of looking sad, Heo.”

“Ah,” said Heo upon realizing Diana was comforting her.

She relaxed her body and let out a sigh.

“Thank you very much.”

She lowered her head a bit while giving her thanks, but she had formed a small smile by the time she looked up again.

She asked Diana a question in a bright voice that sounded a little forced.

“What about you, teacher? Mr. Roger told me you are married.”

“I don’t have that kind of relationship with my husband. The two of us once investigated a small organization’s source of income in the United States. We ended up fighting that enemy and, after about a month of fierce fighting, we found we had a lot in common.”

Heo’s eyes opened wide, but Diana only continued with a smile in her voice.

“We promised each other to singlehandedly bear the death of the other if they die first.”

“What… What kind of person is he?”

“Well, he rejects others, acts superior to everyone else, and believes that he is always right about everything, but at the same time, he truly hopes to find he is wrong.”

Diana’s words almost seemed directed at herself and they left Heo speechless.

Heo mouthed the words to herself and sighed.

Diana’s shoulders fell a bit as she heard that air escaping the girl’s lungs.

“Do you have someone like that?”

Heo’s shoulders tensed when she heard that question and the movement brought noise from the stone necklace around her neck.

“N-no, I don’t.”

“Heo, you know you can’t lie to me.”

Heo looked up and faced forward.

At some point the door had opened and the transport plane’s cargo hold lay behind Diana.

Heo’s room was inside a protective barrier placed inside the already concept-protected transport plane. This was a special plane that masked any concept

signal when transporting concept-altered items. This guest room had been put together especially for Heo.

She felt the chilly breeze blowing in from the door. And…

“Heo.”

She heard a voice that seemed to break through the great noise of the airplane’s jet engines.

“If you had tried to stay in that apartment, I would have taken you here by force if necessary.”

“Is that because…that’s your duty?”

Diana retained her smile as the wind blew at her hair and Heo asked a sudden question.

“What is all this? I was given an explanation, but I still don’t fully understand. Great-grandfather and you belonged to the organization called UCAT…but were my parents part of it too? Did you all fight in deadly battles?”

“Yes, and that is how things ended up how they are.”

That simple answer was accompanied by no change of expression.

Heo was momentarily dumbfounded, but her words exploded out soon thereafter.

“Why!?”

Diana did not reply, so Heo continued speaking. She rose a bit from the bed and her eyebrows shot up a bit as she did so.

“I just want to live a normal life. Is that not what my parents or great-grandfather wanted?”

“But it is because of them that you are who you are. They are the ones that protected the happy life you want and people like them will support it in the future.”

“But…” Heo’s expression crumbled and twisted. “But I want a normal life. Why does everyone have to go out and fight? This…this kind of problem will fix itself if you give it enough time!”

Diana took a step back without saying anything more.

“Teacher!”

Heo called out, but Diana stepped out the door.

Heo reflexively stood up and tried to run after her, but…

“…”

She shrunk back and came to a stop. She had seen a smile in the darkness beyond the closing door.

Diana’s narrowed and smiling eyes looked directly at her through the vanishing gap of the door.

“Heo.”

The smiling mouth opened as the door reached the halfway point.

“Let us return to a previous topic. …You are an excellent student, Heo. After all, you did not sell yourself short at that apartment. Yes, a true woman must help a careless gentleman make his way and she must have the consideration to let him take the first step to lead the way.”

“Eh?”

“Just wait, Heo. The north wind that carries the dark clouds with the lonely star has not abandoned the family of thunder. And Heo, as your teacher, let me give you one answer ahead of time.”

“Eh? Oh, yes, ma’am.”

Diana’s smile grew at her student’s confused reply.

“About your previous question, it is not just time that is needed to resolve your problems. You also need…”

The smiling eyes and voice were joined by the sound of the door closing.

“Resolve. This will be on the test: Point Allocation (Your Life). Got that?”

Relaxation filled the air in an underground portion of the Kanda Laboratory.

However, this was not in a figurative sense.

In a large open space with B3F on the concrete wall, automatons were relaxing the various components of their bodies to let out the excess heat built up from overwork.

B3F was partitioned into a number of blocks and it was normally used for development research and to gather all the philosopher’s stone readings in eastern Japan. Now that American UCAT had requested the use of the large-scale concept space creation device, the entire floor and its philosopher’s stone detectors were being used for that singular purpose.

As a result, the American UCAT forces had taken damage, but the reading determined to be Black Sun had stopped.

Currently, a slight change was being made to the concept space during the time before it naturally vanished.

The concept space corridor running through the Fussa region had been bent to incorporate Yokota Air Base.

That way they could fully protect Heo Thunderson’s transport plane until it took off and entered Tokyo airspace.

Six mechanical dragons had been waiting in Yokota to intercept the black mechanical dragon, so their job was now to escort that past hero's descendent until she reached the very edge of the concept space.

After setting all that up, the automatons announced their success over their shared memory.

"Mission complete. As is to be expected."

They showed some reserved celebration and loosened their joints to let out the heat caused by raising their reaction speed.

The air around them grew hot.

The large-scale concept space creation device was located at the back of B3F. Technicians were gathered around the machine which contained multiple ten meter thick cylinders of different sizes which were held in place on each side by a key-shaped shield.

Those technicians were making adjustments to the machine and they had stopped trying to resist the heat coming from it. Most of them were wearing T-shirts and shorts. To cool themselves off, they had prepared buckets of ice, kiddie pools, and even anti-tank water guns, but they were still finishing up their work.

After this, they only needed to retrieve the concept space creation device terminals set up on the Chuo Expressway, national routes, and other roads. After that, they would need to negotiate with American UCAT about securing Okutama's safety.

Apparently, American UCAT had settled for a ceasefire with the Japanese UCAT counterattack unit there.

At the same time, they did not know what to do with the Vesper Cannon that Japanese UCAT had used as a diversion. One of the automatons intercepting the optical communications spoke over the shared memory.

“They do not know how to load the Vesper Cannon on their mechanical dragons. The top of the cannon sticks out as a single long, narrow panel, so a mechanical dragon cannot climb on top of it and use its legs to grasp it from below.”

The automaton in charge of making drafts, #27, had secretly calculated out some estimated data, so they had been able to compare the new information on the Vesper Cannon’s size with American UCAT’s mechanical dragons.

“For a mechanical dragon to hold the Vesper Cannon from above, I have determined its legs would need to be nearly twice as long as theirs. At the same time, the mechanical dragon mount on top of the Vesper Cannon is about three meters, the same as American UCAT’s mechanical dragons.”

Also, their estimated data said the mount was so thin that it would not attach well to the mechanical dragons. Even if they could attach the Vesper Cannon, the mechanical dragon would wobble back and forth on the mount and lose all sense of unity. If it tried to fly with it, it would almost certainly lose its balance.

“The mechanical dragon needed for the Vesper Cannon would have legs twice the standard length and a body half as wide.”

That estimation allowed them to predict the desired mechanical dragon.

“That is impossible.”

The automatons exchanged questions while relaxing their bodies.

“Why is it impossible?”

“Because of the frame strength. The thinner the body, the thinner the frame. It could not support its own weight like that. A mechanical dragon specially made for the Vesper Cannon would be necessary, but such a dragon would be unable to fly or walk.”

“But if it could not function on its own, they would have built the Vesper Cannon into it from the beginning, right? In that case, there must be a mechanical dragon that overcomes all those problems. It must have been created to fight Black Sun.”

That comment came from 31st “Daisy” who was from 3rd-Gear.

However, someone suddenly gave another opinion.

This was 78th “Gentian” who was also from 3rd.

“But that mechanical dragon did not fight Black Sun. When Black Sun was putting up so much of a fight and was ultimately shot down, would that mechanical dragon really ignore the Vesper Cannon and do nothing?”

It was a simple idea that could be viewed as a thought or a complaint. However…

“…”

Her idea created something among them all.

It was a high-speed series of thoughts brought by their experience and it was similar to a human having a “hunch”. They connected their minds to function as a single thinking machine and they thought on a certain question.

…Why was Black Sun defeated even though the mechanical dragon meant to fight it did not appear?

They thought and they all suddenly gave off a lot of excess heat and jumped up.

“I have determined this is dangerous!! Calculating back arrives at a single conclusion.”

That being…

“If the Vesper Cannon’s user has not appeared, that must not have been Black Sun!!”

The automatons’ shout reverberate through the underground space. A moment later, they all switched back to making individual decisions and began to move.

Those who controlled the machine moved back to their posts, those who measured readings turned back to their screens, and those who operated

computers reached for their mice. A hot wind moved among them and their movement produced mechanical noises and the rustling of clothes.

“Open the optical communications! Ask them to check on the concept readings in the supposed Black Sun’s reactor to see if it truly contains the Concept Core!”

“We just received a transmission from American UCAT! Black Sun contained…a large weakened concept! The only obvious reading from 5th-Gear’s Concept Core inside the concept space is the one in Okutama! Which means…”

Amid the silence, a shout filled their shared memory.

“The defeated mechanical dragon was not Black Sun!”

A moment later, they all looked in a single direction.

A map was displayed on the ceiling so it could be seen from within any of the partitions.

It was a map of Kantou and it was synced with the radar displaying the status of the operation.

“A large philosopher’s stone reading has appeared. It is off the coast of Chiba and moving toward Tokyo through the ocean.”

An actual voice slipped from the mouth of one of the automatons.

A red dot had appeared in the blue ocean to the right of the green map of Kantou.

And…

“This reading is much larger than the previous Black Sun and two…three…four…many more readings have appeared around it! There are six of them and they are each the same size as the defeated mechanical dragon!!”

Confusion swept across that underground space and an alarm began to blare.

“Send out an optical transmission!! This is an emergency! Also, activate the experimental concept space communication device!”

“B-but the alpha test still hasn’t been-…”

“That does not matter! Contact the cellphones of all UCAT personnel inside and outside the concept space! This is no longer a problem for just American UCAT or just Japanese UCAT!”

“Testament… Ah!?”

“What is it!? Did something happen!?”

“Just as I was going to contact American UCAT, the optical transmission facility was destroyed.”

After a breath, a pause that should not have occurred for an automaton, she continued.

“W-we have an intruder!”

The ceiling display instantly changed to Kanda’s underground security camera footage divided between 180 screens. The footage of individuals with a proper ID signal and those not displaying anything were then eliminated.

It finally zoomed in on a single screen which displayed a few unidentified individuals.

Four figures could be seen walking down an underground corridor.

Three of them approached with a girl behind them and those three were…

“Automatons?”

“They are unidentified. The echo scan of their joint movement sound does not match any UCAT-made model.”

They then saw the face of the girl.

“Nagata Tatsumi!!”

As if responding to their voice, she looked directly at the camera and waved.

An instant later, the camera footage blacked out.

One of the technicians spoke in the now-silent space.

“Are they here to steal information on this concept space creation device and the concept space communication device?”

The man almost sounded angry and he started toward the stairs with a wrench in hand and while wearing nothing but a black bathing suit. He was not going to let the enemy approach. However…

“Um, please wait. I will intercept them. This kind of work is my specialty.”

A dignified voice filled the air and a short figure appeared in the central passageway.

She raised her bespectacled head and spoke quietly to the others.

“I am 13th ‘Violet’ of 3rd. If anyone wishes to help, please respond with ‘yes, sir’.”

Below the starry night sky was a large schoolyard. To prepare for the athletic festival, it was divided by straight and curved lines for sporting events and by the spectator seating.

The clock on the school building to the north said it was 8:40 PM and the festival lighting was shut off.

However, a single figure stood in that schoolyard.

It was a boy. The dark-skinned boy had a bandanna over his wavy black hair. Instead of a school uniform, he wore black jeans and a black leather jacket that was a little much for early autumn. But below the jacket, he only wore a black T-shirt that looked like it would leave him feeling chilly.

He faced forward where a motorcycle with a sidecar was stopped past the edge of the schoolyard.

"Since that was fine, they must be almost completely ignoring me."

The eyes hidden by his sunglasses looked down at the straight white line at his feet.

He looked back up and his gaze followed the line for the several dozen meters to the goal.

But when he began to walk, Harakawa stepped over the line and outside the course.

"…"

He then looked up into the sky.

…Should I drive around on the motorcycle to distract myself?

The small radio in the sidecar said there was some lightning in the sky on the Chuo Expressway near Chofu. The announcer said to be careful as that meant a sudden thunderstorm was possible.

In that case, it might be best to travel south along 16 until I reach Yokohama or maybe Shounan.

"Yeah, I think I'll do that. …There's nothing to worry about."

…That idiot said she would be fine.

"She said she would do her best in her new home."

He sighed, told himself that was the last time he would think back to that, and walked toward the motorcycle.

He did not understand that girl.

She would start crying at the slightest provocation, but she also did not like making others worry.

She would readily say the most unbelievable things, but she would look confused when someone tried to believe her.

She would say she was better off alone, but she was afraid to be alone.

"She's such a liar."

…And she's such a little kid. You can always tell when she's lying.

She was probably the only one who had not noticed.

When Heo Thunderson lied, she would shrink down. She would stiffen her shoulders as if trying to make herself disappear and as if she did not like having to lie.

If being able to lie without being found out made one an adult, then she was a child.

Harakawa recalled his most recent memory of her.

He recalled her slender shoulders when she had said she was fine and that she would do her best in her new life.

"You liar!!"

The sound of his own shout brought his feet to a stop.

He then took in a breath as if he had just remembered something and he shook his head.

…Why am I so mad? Ignore it like you always do. You need to protect your normal life.

You put so much distance between you and tried to drive her out, didn't you? he told himself.

But another fact remained and that fact would not leave his heart.

"You're the one who took her in because you couldn't ignore her."

He already had his answer to what had started this.

He lowered his gaze, but there was no longer a line at his feet.

He checked and found his stopped feet had already reached the goal. He had indeed reached this spot while walking along the outside of the course.

"…Dammit."

His back was turned to the straight line he could see when he looked over his shoulder.

"Dammit."

He gathered strength in his shoulders and walked forward.

And he thought.

"Dammit!"

He did not have a shift at the base today.

"…Dammit!"

But wouldn't it be perfectly normal to stop by the base since he had some extra time?

“Goddammit!”

He was low on money this month, so couldn’t he ask for an extra shift?

“Yeah, that’s right!”

He arrived at the motorcycle. The black vehicle was stopped along the ninety degree corner leading to the academy’s main gate.

…I’m just going. I stop by the base all the time.

He placed one leg over the motorcycle’s seat and sat down. The sidecar was empty.

He then recalled the final moment. What had Heo said when she had left?

…A bookstore, hm?

He could guess his mother had told her. Heo had simply believed it and mentioned it without knowing at all how he felt, but…

“Is that something to say to me so proudly, Heo Thunderson!?”

He jammed the key in the ignition and turned it.

He put back on his sunglasses and took a breath.

Just then, sudden shadow and light appeared from the left.

“…!?”

Before he could erase his look of suspicion, something stopped next to him.

It was a large motorcycle with two people sitting on it.

“The president and treasurer?”

That was all he said before looking away from the two who had a giant cloth bag attached to their motorcycle.

The treasurer wore a track suit and gave a bitter smile from the back of the motorcycle.

“Oh? You don’t have any questions for us? Even though we’ve been watching you since you got here?”

“When I thought about it, I realized you’re the same breed of eccentric as Sayama. I would end up regretting anything I asked you.”

“Hold it right there, second year. You need to watch how you speak to your upperclassmen.”

“Then let me tell you something,” said Harakawa while putting on his riding gloves. “In the language spoken in the country of the father I hate so much, people address both their elders and little kids with the word ‘you’.”

“ ‘Yoo’? What’s that mean, Chisato?”

The president turned around with a frown and the treasurer punched him upwards.

While Harakawa ignored that normal turn of events, the treasurer held the head of her swaying partner.

“Harakawa, take these.”

She held out a black watch and a cellphone. He noticed she wore an identical watch but the president did not.

“Why do I have to wear the president’s?”

“Just put it on. It’s a magic tool to bring you closer to Heo Thunderson. I’ll tell you how to use it on the way. After that, do as you wish. We have work to do at Okutama, so we’ll have to leave partway there. We’ve already contacted Sayama, so he might have something to tell you.”

“I see.”

With that, Harakawa squeezed the accelerator.

He moved forward and toward Taka-Akita Academy's northeastern gate. That was near Akigawa's northeastern end which was not far from the neighboring city of Fussa. It was almost a straight shot to Yokota Air Base.

"Ah, wait! C'mon, Kaku!"

He heard a blow behind him and then the light began to pursue.

But despite the movement from behind, Harakawa only accelerated further. He shot past a school building and down the gravel road through the row of student dormitories.

He could hear the tires tearing across those stones.

…What am I even thinking of doing?

Still, there were a few things he did know. The night before, she had started to cry and stopped running on the hundred meter track. And today, she had lied so he would not worry and yet had given him her support.

He had said nothing and had done nothing for her. So if he was going to make it…

"Honestly."

He squeezed the accelerator tighter.

"This isn't like me at all."

"Harakawa!"

The light behind him caught up and raced alongside him. He heard the treasurer call out his name, but Harakawa did not respond. "Someone else" spoke instead.

"I'm not Harakawa right now. After all, I'm doing something that isn't like me at all."

“Eh?”

Hearing that tone of question, he pushed his sunglasses up his nose to hide his eyes and opened his mouth.

“Right now, I’ll use the surname of the father I hate so much.”

“Your father’s surname?”

“That’s right,” he said into the oncoming wind. “Dan Northwind. That’s my name if I take on my father’s surname.”

It flew into the sky. That sky covered a burning city and a harbor.

It was over eight hundred meters long as it flew through that sky. Its main body was only three hundred meters, but it had evolved additional armor and twin-fuselage wings that greatly supported its body. This was its perfect battle equipment that it had not possessed ten years ago or the night before last.

It travelled into the western sky with its greatest fighting power.

When it had entered the bay, it had noticed some kind of concept space instantly stretch out and envelop it.

Leaving that space would be easy, but the scene visible below and the information from the child craft it had sent on ahead told it the concept space contained enough power to destroy one of the child craft.

It rode an updraft and thought on the fact that a wild beast attacked the weakest enemy first.

But it was not a wild beast. It knew it was a machine meant to protect mankind.

The false humanity existed outside the concept space, so what was this fighting force inside the concept space?

It decided this world must have machines built for the same purpose as it.

That fact seemed familiar.

It had lost its memories, but something it retained allowed it to recall the slight vestiges of a memory.

It had once fought opponents like this. That enemy had come as an army and it had once lost to them. The enemy army had been nearly destroyed, but the result of that fight had been put off until later.

"…"

It ascended, wrapped itself in wind, and accelerated.

The large black mechanical dragon decided to fight them. Was it for the conclusion of that battle it did not remember? Was it for the lost people it did not remember? Or was it simply because it had evolved to fight?

It did not know, but it did know it sought something.

It sought many things.

Why did it desire to fight?

Where were the people it was meant to serve?

Why had it lost its memories and why did it wish for those people despite losing its memories?

Why?

"…"

The black mechanical dragon stopped thinking.

It could simply crush any problems one-by-one and find the answers. The first step was eliminating the enemy that was trying to get in its way.

It wished to hurry. Its additional twin-fuselage was an extension of its wings and that closed slightly to point all of its rear accelerators backwards.

It continued on.

The air was now a wall of great pressure, but it knew that breaking through that wall to continue forward was known as flying.

A group followed in the sky behind it.

They were all black mechanical dragons.

Countless dragons appeared from the sky and the sea and they were divided between two general sizes: the small forty meter ones and the midsized three-hundred meter ones.

There were six of the midsized ones and not even the large one could determine how many small ones there were.

This was an army of black mechanical dragons.

This is evolution, it thought.

In the past, it had been powerful yet alone, and that was why it had been cornered and sunk.

It had chosen the very same method its former enemy had used to defeat it. It had duplicated its own parts to create companions.

Each of the child craft it sent out to gather information obeyed their imperfect instincts and sought the enemy.

As a result, the enemy had destroyed one of those midsized craft.

Twice now, it had seen the false humanity that was its enemy.

Both times, it had removed this additional armor to approach the nostalgic scent it had detected.

The first time, its evolution had been incomplete and it did not entirely remember the incident, but it recalled that the incident had happened in front of a small building in a grassy field. A woman had tried to protect the building from it, but it had sensed the familiar scent within the building and had injured her with its claws while trying to move her out of the way.

It did not think that woman was its enemy, but it did not entirely remember what had happened afterwards.

The second time had been two days ago. It had found a man wielding a spear within a small concept space.

It did not know if it knew that man, but when it had brought its claws to the man, something had begun within it. It was as if lost functionality had restarted and the hands of a clock had begun to move again.

It had been confused.

It had been so confused by the unexpected development that it had fled. It had escaped to the northern ocean it lived in. When it had detected the nostalgic air on the way back, it had left the issue to a midsized child craft.

The child craft had been attacked and that had told it a new fight was beginning. There was a nearby enemy that gave off the familiar scent of a destroyed world.

It more or less knew how powerful that enemy was. When the previous child craft had been destroyed, that child craft had sent back an analysis if the enemy's power. Even the enemy's primary weapons had only barely managed to destroy the midsized craft.

However, it erased that prediction. After all, its former enemy had destroyed it.

This time, it would utterly destroy its enemy and it would destroy the false humanity that filled this world.

It did not care if it became the only thing in the world. It only needed to continue evolving, increase its army, and envelop the entire world. If it did that, it was possible the humanity it knew would eventually return.

Once that happened, would the people praise it for completely protecting the world using the machines they had created to protect people? Would they praise it for building all that up on its own?

Would they praise it and say that was a truly happy thing?

“_____”

It opened its mouth and roared.

And as it roared, it recalled the name its child craft had heard during the previous battle: Black Sun.

If it became a sun in this black sky, would humanity return? While wondering that, it set Black Sun as its own name.

While letting out a cry of joy at having a name, it felt a great familiar sensation to the west.

Chapter 27: Beyond the Forefront

Chapter 27

“Beyond the Forefront”

There is only one foremost point
But how far does the empty space continue past that?

There is only one foremost point

But how far does the empty space continue past that?

Motion filled an underground space made of concrete.

The motion came from a confused mixture of a hot wind, a cold wind, and a wind of bullets that pierced through both other winds. Soon, new movement created yet another wind.

This wind was known as a whirl.

The whirlwind filled a broad floor filled with pillars and it had four points of origin.

Three of those were expressionless automatons. They wore white maid uniforms and each held a different item: one a shield, one a spear, and one a bow. The shield doll always stood in front, the spear doll came next and took action whenever the enemy approached, and the bow doll stood in the back and continually fired arrows while the enemy was more distant.

The last of the wind's points of origin was an automaton in a black maid uniform. Her name was Violet and her glasses acted as a windshield for her vision as she pursued the enemy with a submachine gun in her right hand.

She ran by a concrete wall that said B2F.

This construction floor was used to develop gods of war and other machines and it was also used to prepare various items for transport, so it had relatively few partition walls.

Violet leaped to the right in the center of that floor and she spun around by digging her toes into the floor upon landing. She ran along with the wind toward the other three dolls.

The three wielding shield, spear, and bow circled the floor while keeping the shield maid toward the center at all times.

When approaching or falling back, the shield would move forward and hide those behind her. When Violet approached, the spear would suddenly attack from the right or left of the shield.

When more distant, the bow would fire again and again whenever Violet tried to get anything but a head-on angle.

The way the three maids circled the floor in a line bound Violet's movements.

"Um, I have determined this is a pain."

Her bullets would be deflected by the white elliptical shield, but if she tried to catch her breath afterwards, either the tip of the spear would target her chest from the side of the shield or a steel arrow would target her legs from a distance.

She had no choice but to keep moving, but…

"Ah, the excess heat is affecting my movements."

Automatons only breathed for show. Their joints were simple sockets and their body parts were only connected by the steel wires that took the place of muscles and the conductive wires that functioned as nerves. Each body part had to expel its heat on its own.

That meant extended periods of motion would make them begin to boil on the inside. Combat automatons had a humanoid structure partially to increase the durability of their joints, but it was more about allowing the water cooling effect of perspiration and circulation.

But Violet could not do that. If she relaxed her joints and the bases of her wire cylinders to expel the heat, the enemy would immediately take advantage of her slowed movements.

And from the look of the three enemies…

“Um, those are simple combat models, aren’t they?”

She could tell by viewing them with her thermal vision. Their joints had the same simple structure as her own, but the internal parts that moved the steel wires were kept in the torso or gathered together as much as possible.

For example, the parts to move Violet’s shoulders were installed in her shoulders and upper arms to improve her balance. Simply put, it was a twin engine system. Meanwhile, the enemies’ were only located in the shoulders. They had a single engine system. That prevented them from making more subtle movements, but it was lighter, simpler, and easier to maintain. And by making them lighter, they could be installed in locations better protected by their armor.

Also, having fewer heat-producing parts made it easier to position the openings to expel that heat.

“…!”

An arrow flew toward the right side of her face, so Violet accelerated left to avoid it.

As soon as she kicked off the floor, the shield was right in front of her.

She was not going to hit it, but she did not want it to block her vision, so she accelerated further to the left.

As she did, the spear flew toward her from the left.

The strike would slice her torso in two, but she could evade by jumping and almost flying into the air to the left.

However, the heat built up inside her interfered. The overworked motors spun in vain.

“I can’t avoid it!?”

An instant later, Violet chose to evade without relying on the movements of her limbs.

She chose the one function she excelled at: gravitational control.

The three enemies also possessed that function, but she knew their power was only on an independent level.

Violet side-flipped to the left by reversing up and down.

In the short moment that she cleared the blade and rotated to a midair handstand, she prepared her submachine gun. Below her, the ones hiding behind the shield were now in view.

She only had to fire.

But in that instant, the spear tip suddenly jumped up toward her despite having just been swung in a different direction.

“!?”

The movement completely ignored inertia, but the cause was simple. The shield doll standing near the spear tip had struck it from below and the bow doll had struck the back end of the spear from above.

The spear shot up while using the center doll’s grip on it as the fulcrum and it moved directly toward Violet’s torso.

“Nn.”

Just before firing the submachine gun, she slammed it against the silver line arcing toward her.

With the sound of shattering glass, the submachine gun broke to pieces.

But Violet used the recoil to jump away from her enemies.

That action and use of her gravitational control had brought her internal heat to its limit.

She had lost her primary weapon, so she only had a combat knife, a handgun, and a hand grenade.

And just as she landed, she spotted a single figure in the floor's entrance.

…Nagata Tatsumi!

Her arms were spread in front of her and she had something like rings on all her fingers.

"Can you see these? A gaudy kind of fashion, isn't it? This is the Army's special remote controller."

Tatsumi's voice coincided with Violet's landing and Violet realized what she was truly up against here.

"We didn't have the technology or spare time to create artificial intelligence, so we created dolls that could take the place of soldiers. I'm here to test those out a little."

Violet and Tatsumi faced each other with the three dolls in between them.

Violet's hips were lowered from landing and she pulled her knife from her apron as she slowly stood.

She had an awful lot of heat stored up in her body. The oil of her circulatory system had lost its viscosity and she could sense air bubbles inside it.

She knew she could not win at her current level of output, but…

"…"

A method for accurately expelling that heat suddenly occurred to her.

She looked up in surprise, but she also knew she could not let the enemy catch on.

And so she quickly looked to Tatsumi through her glasses and spoke the words needed to trick her.

“Um, in other words…”

She made the appropriate statement for the situation.

“You fight by controlling dolls? But then where is their will to fight?”

“Oh, how scary. But your will is also artificial, so I could also ask where it is.”

Tatsumi’s response told Violet the girl had not noticed her chance of victory.

At that point, a few more figures appeared at the top of the stairway that led down to next floor.

They were Violet’s fellow automatons. There were around five of them, but their unit characteristics were not suited for combat and Violet could predict this was not an enemy that could be overwhelmed by numbers.

“Everyone, stay back. …You are recording the data of this battle, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Tatsumi with a step to the right.

Two new individuals came into view behind her.

One was a girl and the other was a large dog.

However, Violet noticed something odd with her thermal vision. The girl and Tatsumi had a normal human heat distribution, but the dog was simply tinged with faint heat. It had no real form.

One of her fellow automatons explained why.

“That is the data stealing girl named Shino.”

Shino bowed and hid behind Tatsumi whose hands were still raised.

“The dogs have already begun devouring the data here. During the summer, we acquired most of Japanese UCAT’s weaponry documents and internal diagrams, so now we just need to get our hands on the information related to the large-scale concept space creation device and concept space communication device.” She smiled. “Even if Japanese UCAT creates their own battlefield, we will be able to alter it and communicate within it. Also, we will have further strengthened the weapons we made with your information and we will possess maps of your facilities.”

With that, the three dolls prepared to resume the fight.

In case of possible damage, Violet’s fellow automatons took a step back toward the stairway.

And Tatsumi continued to speak.

“Now, help me buy some time and give me some data while you do. How much can you automatons fight and how skilled am I with this remote control?”

Violet began to move before Tatsumi had finished speaking. She took the first step toward her victory.

First, she swung her arm to throw the knife.

“!?”

The shield doll moved to block the knife, but the weapon had a bit of gravitational control in it.

The steel blade could be heard piercing through the top of the ellipse.

While watching the three enemies and the shaking knife, Violet spoke to her fellow automatons. Even as she did so, she felt bad for receiving help from units whose primary skills were those of maids.

“U-um, did you bring my personal storage box?”

“Yes, sir. It’s right here.”

“Th-then prepare one of #4 and three of #5.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

She saw they were holding a pink storage box by the staircase and she was a little worried they might have dropped the potted plant that had been sitting on it.

…But they are better at taking care of flowers than me.

She calmed herself down and spoke to Tatsumi.

“U-um, excuse me.”

“Yes? What is it? I’m guessing you’re stalling to help cool down, but you won’t have enough time to expel much of your heat. In that case, I suppose I’ll hear you out before I destroy you.”

Violet nodded and held her right hand forward with the index and middle fingers raised.

“Thank you for giving me your time. …I was born and raised in 3rd as a maid automaton, my identifier is 13th, and my name is Violet. My occupation and Gear were lost and I found myself in Japan of Low-Gear, which lies beyond all concepts. Eventually, I found myself here in Japanese UCAT’s Kanda Laboratory. I serve Lady Miyako, the successor to 3rd-Gear, but this is the place that has taken me in and protected my king.”

She lowered her raised fingers and pointed at her opponent.

“I am a named automaton. It was for precisely this sort of situation that I was given a name and thus made a proper individual. Our flowers do not bloom upon death. An automaton blooms in a more reserved fashion but still repays her debts of gratitude. In exchange for her name, an automaton will fulfill her work even if it means to wither away. So…”

She leaned forward and took a first step of acceleration.

“Let us see if the spirit of the unit given the flower name Violet can be crushed by mere dolls!”

She ran and took her second step.

“Oh?”

She stepped on an empty cartridge and fell head first to the floor.

Shino saw the automaton named Violet trip quite spectacularly.

This was her first time seeing an actual automaton and was also her first time seeing one tripping.

It happened so suddenly that she was left dumbfounded.

…Can automatons be clumsy!?

This was a new discovery. She had to tell Mikoku when she saw her next.

But Mikoku was being cold to her recently. She would not hang around Shino during training and she always tried to warn Shino away from any missions she took.

…She doesn’t think I’m capable.

Shino brought a hand to her chest and to the cloisonné pendant Mikoku had given her as a souvenir of Kurashiki.

Just as she lightly touched the red half circle of pottery, Tatsumi turned from Violet and toward her. Tatsumi looked a little dumbfounded, which was rare for her.

“She’s just like you.”

“I-I don’t trip like that!”

“True. You would have fallen – wham! – right onto your butt. Wham! Wham!!”

“Y-you don’t have to repeat it! More importantly, hurry up and…”

She was going to say “finish her”, but she stopped herself because that was not something to say so casually.

She nodded to solidify her awareness of that fact and Tatsumi’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes, that’s for the best. For you anyway. You need to fear those words.”

“Eh?”

As she looked up in confusion, sweat fell from her forehead and to her cheeks. However, this was not due to nerves. It came from the heat trapped in the underground space.

Tatsumi then turned back to the fallen automaton. Her fingers moved a bit to put the three dolls in motion.

They turned their shield toward the enemy and crouched down. The way the rearmost doll held her bow showed her intent to safely settle this with a projectile.

However, Shino continued to feel the heat and it almost seemed like the room temperature was rising.

…Tatsumi-san told me about this, didn’t she?

When indoors, highly sealed automatons like the 3rd variety had a tendency to overheat.

This one named Violet should have reached her limit, but even while collapsed on the ground, her joints and other parts remained closed and thus were not expelling any heat. It was all still trapped inside her.

Shino saw Tatsumi’s doll draw its bowstring. Shino turned toward the target of the coming shot and realized a certain fact.

Violet had scattered empty cartridges while firing her submachine gun, so they littered the floor. It was stepping on one of those that had made her trip.

…That means the cartridge rolled beneath her foot.

But Shino noticed that the cartridge located where she had tripped was crushed flat.

It had clearly not rolled and that led to a single conclusion.

…She stepped on the cartridge, pretended to trip, and intentionally fell?

She wondered why and found the answer in an unexpected place.

Shiro, the ghost dog standing to her right, suddenly lay down as if it had nothing to do.

It placed its belly on the floor.

"Don't tell me…"

Shino turned toward Tatsumi's back. Tatsumi was moving her fingers in order to fire the arrow.

"Tatsumi! This is dangerous! That automaton is expelling her heat! She's lying on the cold concrete so it absorbs all the heat from her body!"

A moment later, wind blew.

The arrow was fired and a form raced forward to strike back. That form belonged to an automaton.

Violet ran.

She saw Tatsumi frown and saw the bow doll's hand let go of the arrow.

She jumped to the right to avoid it.

The enemy had crouched down to defend against a possible attack from the floor, but that meant they could not immediately stand up and react.

Violet leaped with a single footstep and circled around to the right.

With the handgun in her right hand, she fired into the shield to prevent the doll from moving it.

The repeated sounds of metal striking metal rang out and the shield was stuck down at waist height. If Violet continued circling around to the side, she would win.

However, she saw Tatsumi narrow her eyes and smile.

A moment later, the doll holding the spear swung that spear sideways and struck the doll in front of her with the shaft.

“!?”

The doll was knocked right and thus toward Violet.

And that shield automaton used that movement to keep up with her.

The three of them rotated and the wind blew, but Violet remained at the leading edge of that wind.

She had only expelled enough heat for this swift movement. She would have to settle this in only a few seconds.

She ran in an arc toward the wall near the staircase in the right corner.

However, the three dolls kept up with her as they rotated with the shield at the front.

Violet continued running regardless, fired her handgun, and gave a silent instruction just before reaching the wall.

“#4 and #5!”

Before that shared thought had finished, the objects flew toward her.

With unparalleled control, her fellow automatons threw her a handgun identical to the one in her right hand and three magazines.

As soon as the magazine of her current handgun ran out, she ejected it. In the same motion, she directly slammed one of the airborne magazines into place and caught the other handgun with her left hand.

She now had two guns and two spare magazines flew toward her as well.

Just as she was about to receive them, the shield doll stepped forward and toward her.

But by the wall, Violet took a step and reached toward the airborne magazines.

“Here I go.”

She used her gravitational control to launch the two magazines above the three dolls.

At the same time, she accurately fired both handguns into those magazines.

“Um, everyone!”

“Yes, sir!!”

The automatons waiting by the stairway instantly scanned the destruction of the magazines, calculated out the movements of the scattering fragments and bullets, and sent the result back to Violet.

Violet repeatedly fired her handguns toward the ignition portion of the bullets from the two scattering magazines.

The tips of the bullets she was firing had a simple gravity ram attached. These were normally meant to increase the penetrative power, but they had a different use here.

She was firing at the back end of all the bullets scattering in midair in order to ignite them.

With no barrel, the bullets did not have a stable flight, but several dozen rounds still rained down from close range.

"…!"

The three dolls trembled in the shower of impacts and noise.

However, Violet knew this much was not enough to have any real effect. The bullets ripped holes in the upper surfaces of the dolls and they calmly turned to face her with the shimmering of their internal heat rising from the holes.

But it was too late.

Violet had already turned toward the three of them while rushing just past the wall.

At her speed, a collision was unavoidable, so the shield was placed forward to stop her.

Next, the spear would be thrust past the left side of the shield to hit her in the chest.

Violet accelerated and pushed on her own back with her gravitational control.

"…!"

She reached the shield before the spear and she had one goal: the grip of the knife she had thrown into the shield earlier.

She stepped on it and jumped.

An instant later, a high-speed strike pierced through the spot she had just left.

Once again, the bottom of the spear tip was struck from below to knock it up toward her.

Violet had expected all of this, so she threw herself forward in midair. She flipped halfway around and shifted her gravitational control once she was truly upside-down. She set her gravity so the ceiling was the floor.

Her feet landed on the ceiling and she turned to the right in order to avoid the pursuing spear.

The spear slipped past her and continued rotating around and Violet almost seemed to follow after it as she stepped back along the ceiling to circle behind the three dolls.

That was when another attack arrived: the bow and arrow.

The bow doll had struck the back of the spear downwards to begin its rotation, but she had swiftly nocked an arrow afterwards. She was just barely fast enough, but if she fired straight up, it would hit Violet.

Or it should have.

What Violet did in response was truly simple.

She swung her right elbow back and rotated her body.

Her extended elbow struck the shaft of the spear that had rotated past her.

As the spear was swung down, it struck the bow doll diagonally from the neck to the waist.

The sound of the doll being sliced sounded a lot like splitting bamboo.

It was a very clear sound and the bow doll began to collapse with the arrow still pointed upwards in her bow.

But Violet did not overlook that. She jumped down from the ceiling, flipped back around, and reset her gravitational control so the floor was the floor.

And as soon as she landed, she supported the collapsing bow doll from behind. She did so by supporting the hand holding the bow and the hand holding the arrow and pointing them forward.

After landing on the floor and supporting the bow doll, she faced forward and saw the spear and shield dolls.

She re-nocked the arrow and fired it.

She targeted the center of the chest and the steel arrow accurately pierced both dolls.

"…"

With a metallic sound, the arrow hit the back of the shield, launching it forward from the doll's hand and into the wall.

The empty metallic sound tumbled down the wall, but Violet had already turned her back on it.

She did not have much movement time left and her only remaining weapon was a single grenade. If she detonated it in the entrance to the stairway leading upwards, her job would be complete. And due to fighting by the wall, Tatsumi would have had to move out of the corridor to keep the dolls in her field of vision. There was no longer any way for her to escape the grenade.

When Violet faced forward and began to run, she saw that Tatsumi was indeed in the same entrance as before.

The girl was smiling, but her shoulders were lowered.

"Oh, dear. It looks like I shouldn't try this kind of them without more practice. I need to rethink some things."

But she continued to face Violet.

"How about you hurry up and throw the grenade? Or will you show me a more automaton-like fighting style? In other words, approach us with the grenade in

hand to defeat us even if it means your own destruction. That is the truly scary aspect of an automaton that can be good-as-new after some repairs. Am I wrong?"

"…"

Tatsumi had seen through her intentions. This was what Sayama had done to Violet during the battle in Kurashiki. Despite being a human, he had ignored any fear of his own destruction and focused entirely on eliminating his opponent.

…You must ensure victory.

As an automaton, she did not need to fear damage. She had intended to teach Tatsumi that, but…

"Too bad. Now, let me tell you how we view things."

Tatsumi brushed her fingers across each other as if massaging them and that simple action removed all ten rings. She then held them in her right hand.

"Do you know what we do when a doll breaks?"

"…?"

"Girls will feel a little sad and place it as if it is going to sleep, but we will then receive a new doll. And as for the old doll…"

She crushed the rings in her grip.

"We throw them out with the burnable trash. …Come, Shino. You should have the data by now, so let's get home."

With those words, Tatsumi leaped toward the stairway.

I won't let you escape, thought Violet as she ran forward, but she suddenly felt something pressing on her back.

…Eh?

She then felt herself floating, but after that…

“!?”

She was thrown forward too quickly for her sense of balance to keep up.

By the time she realized the three dolls had exploded, she had slammed into one of the concrete pillars supporting the ceiling. By the time her entire body’s framework was crushed, the explosive blast arrived like a wall of sand.

She could no longer hear anything in the impact, but she could tell from where she hit that the pillar had broken.

Her auditory devices informed her that the ceiling had cracked and started to collapse.

The information her artificial brain received about her body did not tell her that she could not move her body. It instead told her that her body was no longer there.

To avoid any confusion caused by the destruction of her body, her artificial consciousness rapidly closed down.

But just before it did, Violet made a prediction and sent it out over her shared memory. She said the enemy had likely escaped with most of their information, that the upper floor of the Kanda Laboratory had likely collapsed, and…

…*Those new dolls.*

They likely intended to eventually control Typhon like that.

“And…”

She informed her fellow automatons that she had completed her job and that they should continue with their jobs.

After all, they had unknowingly allowed Black Sun to approach outside.

And so she told them to assist in the fight against 5th-Gear.

Chapter 28: Her Guidance

Chapter 28

“Her Guidance”

Wait without calling out to them
The past is already calling out
To the path that can only lead to the present

Wait without calling out to them

The past is already calling out

To the path that can only lead to the present

Three colors were displayed on a twenty centimeter screen.

The colors were divided into three horizontal bands. From bottom to top, they were gray, dark green, and black.

The gray at the very bottom was asphalt, the green on top of it was grass, and the black at the top was the night.

It was an image of the night sky at the end of a runway.

A face was reflected in the glass screen. The face belonged to a girl with short, blonde hair and an orange work jacket who was standing in a small room.

The outside sound reached the small room.

That sound was loud and it had no single source. It simply washed over the entirety of the room.

The girl faced the screen while listening to it and her eyes focused on the bands of color there.

“I have to say goodbye to this country, don’t I?”

The girl named Heo muttered to herself with her gaze fixed on that screen.

Not long ago, she had heard a strange voice and the city visible in the screen had gone silent. Before, car headlights had moved back and forth between the dark green and black bands, but that movement was gone.

She knew this was known as a concept space.

She also knew that only UCAT and their enemies could create these spaces.

However, Diana had said Black Sun, her demon, was gone.

“What else is there?”

She saw something on the screen moving along the grass from the right and lining up.

They initially looked like blue dogs taking a walk on the grass, but she shook her head to eliminate that illusion. The two blue forms lined up on the green band were in the center of the twenty centimeter screen and their faces were about the same height as the screen.

She could not be sure without any other objects to compare them to, but they were likely the same size as the airplane.

…Mechanical dragons.

Her great-grandfather and her real great-grandfather had taken part in their initial development as test pilots and American UCAT had continued to research them after the Concept War. Now, they were American UCAT’s greatest weapons.

It had been identical machines that had defeated Black Sun.

American UCAT supposedly owned sixty-eight of them and six of those would escort her through the concept space’s skies until her airplane left Tokyo.

She thought about the fact that she was being protected.

“…”

She remained silent.

But then the sound surrounding her changed. It rapidly grew and the entire room shook.

The airplane was preparing for takeoff.

The shaking of the room moved from right to left and the room itself almost seemed to float, but the sound grew even louder and the airplane's brakes would not allow it to advance.

The airplane had to build up a lot of power so it could rise into the air and fly forward. To accomplish that, the engine's roar grew to what sounded like a scream and suddenly…

"…"

It began to move.

The low, heavy sound of the air pressing in reached Heo from the left as she watched the screen.

At the same time, everything was pulled to the right.

The screen began to scroll from left to right. Everything in that visible world began to move.

Ahh, thought Heo. *It's already time to say goodbye.*

She had already known she was leaving by the time she had been brought to Yokota Air Base within the concept space. She had known she would leave her past life and begin a safe and protected new life.

The sound of the engine blasted through the room as if it had been released.

At the same time, the blue mechanical dragons stepped forward after a short delay and prepared to fly.

"…!?"

But there was an explosion.

Heo did not understand what she was seeing on the screen in real time.

The blue dragons had been following along in the scrolling gray, above the scrolling green, and below the scrolling black, but something had happened to the farther away of the two.

“It exploded!?”

Next, the closer one also exploded as it prepared for takeoff.

…Eh?

She had no idea what was happening, but she saw the number of colors grow. Red was added to the gray, green, and black.

And this was the red of flames.

“…”

She took in a breath, brought a hand to her necklace, and took in another breath.

She tried to express her disbelief yet could not form the words, but a new color arrived in their place.

No, this was not a new color. More of an existing color was added: black.

A black form flew from the sky to the left and landed on the green band.

Heo saw that the black was a mechanical dragon.

But it was not alone. She saw four identical black dragons descend to the green. They were almost half again as big as the blue dragons and they raised their heads and roared into the sky once they landed.

The machines’ bestial cries reverberated throughout the night sky.

This chorus was great enough to drown out even the engines of the transport plane racing down the runway.

They’re demons, thought Heo. *A pack of demons is here.*

…But why?

“Why!?”

Harakawa charged into Yokota Air Base.

Oddly enough, the gate was unmanned. No, the absence of people had begun when he had heard an odd voice while climbing the hill in Fussa that began at the Tama River and while approaching Route 16 in front of the base.

He had turned around in confusion, but the president and treasurer’s motorcycle had vanished. They had likely started toward Okutama on the Oume Highway before reaching Route 16. Currently, all the cars on the road were empty and unmoving. A few had driven up on the curb or gotten into multicar wrecks.

Nevertheless, everything was empty and there was no sign of the police.

He was curious about the watch the treasurer had given him and that he had done with it as she had instructed. His cellphone had yet to ring, but the watch had vibrated just before everyone had vanished.

And he heard another sound.

Some engines were running on the large runway to the east of the base.

Before vanishing, the president had said Heo would be onboard the transport plane he found here.

“Why are you telling me this?” he had asked. “Will Heo join you if I’m with her?”

“That’s not what this is,” the president had said. “We’re giving her the right to choose where in the world she will be. Isn’t that what you want? Or do you plan on controlling what she does? You don’t, do you?”

The boy had acted like he understood Harakawa, so it had not been worth discussing with him.

And so Harakawa twisted the accelerator and tore through the wind.

The unmanned gate was already behind him and the broad, straight path ahead of him was filled with scarlet light. The transport plane's idling had reached its limit and it was about to start moving.

…This is ridiculous!

"What am I going to do!? The hatch is closed and it doesn't have any windows. So what am I going to do? Screw this up and I could even lose my job here."

He twisted the accelerator.

"Who cares!?"

After instantly passing between half-cylindrical storage buildings and then between the line of trees and fence beyond that, he could see a straight line of grass and asphalt cutting across from left to right. A green transport plane was facing right and thus eastward on it.

He saw the plane had begun to move.

"…!"

He then saw two objects arrive on the grass to his left.

They were giant blue beasts. It took him a second to recognize them as dragons and his motorcycle had already shot out from the line of trees by then. He crossed the auxiliary road in an instant and raced across the grass.

The tires started to spin, so he lowered his center of gravity to press them down and continue forward.

At that point, the two blue dragons exploded.

“What?”

The answer to his question arrived from the eastern sky.

He saw multiple black dragons.

There were four of them and they tore apart the grass as they landed. Their weight ripped up the lawn as they slid to a stop and they all roared toward the sky before that motion ended.

Their voices shook everything.

Harakawa did not know what was happening, but he did not hesitate. He pointed the handlebars toward the transport plane, leaned his center of gravity forward, and squeezed the accelerator.

Based on the plane’s speed and course, there was no preventing it from taking off at this point. Stopping the engines would only cause it to crash into the barriers at the end of the runway.

Its only option was to fly and thus his only option was to pursue.

His motorcycle’s engine roared and he could feel that vibration over the roaring of the black dragons.

“Go!”

The motorcycle charged onto the asphalt of the runway and instantly caught up to the transport plane arriving from the left.

However, the plane was moving more quickly.

He decided the sidecar was in the way, so pulled the release lever located between it and the motorcycle. However, it was still connected by the spare hook.

“Forgive me!”

He squeezed the accelerator and the front wheel rose. The force of that motion tossed the sidecar backwards and unhooked it, but he could no longer even hear it tumbling.

The only thing in his mind was the fact that he could catch up more easily without the excess weight.

He opened his mouth, inhaled, and leaned on the handlebars to push down the raised front wheel.

He saw the speedometer for a split second and realized he was moving at 130 kph. A fall at this speed would kill him instantly.

The raised wheel reached the ground and the stabilized motorcycle accelerated as if trying to tear into the back of the transport plane.

“Why you…”

The plane almost seemed to be running away and the wind it blew backwards seemed intent on rejecting him.

“Don’t underestimate a delinquent!!”

The gears connected and Harakawa raced forward.

He continued on and gradually caught up, but what would he do then? And what would he do about those black dragons?

The answer came from an unexpected place. A voice reached him from beyond the roar of the plane in front of him.

“An excellent answer.”

The plane shot by the figure that had spoken.

Someone stood on the runway as if waiting for him. Despite the wind and noise, not even her hair was blowing.

…That's the woman who was with Heo.

The tall woman had wavy gray hair, wore a black suit, and bent her eyes in a smile.

"So how about I give you a reward?"

She pulled a felt-tip pen from her pocket. It was a red one and she drew a diagram with quick movements of her hand. Specifically, she drew a flower symbol on the transport plane's rear hatch as it passed by her.

"Open up."

And exactly that happened.

The rear hatch suddenly opened while completely ignoring the presence of its actuators. It looked a lot like an animal opening its mouth.

At the same time, the plane lost its balance, raised its nose, and took off.

"That was fast!" shouted Harakawa as he made a split-second decision.

He stood up on the motorcycle's seat and jumped toward the hatch as it floated up in front of him.

"Don't get bit," said the woman as he passed by her.

Before he could wonder what that meant, the hatch closed and swallowed him up.

The transport plane flew up from the runway and shrank into the eastern sky.

The ones on the surface watching it leave were the giant black machines and…

"Oh, honey. You're too late to see her off."

The woman standing on the runway gave that comment as she turned around.

Her gaze landed on a skinny elderly man standing in the center of the runway.

A blue stone hung from the string wrapped around his hand and he rolled up his suit's sleeve.

"Okutama. Okutama is in Roger's hands. More importantly, Diana."

"What is it, honey? Or would you prefer I called you Colonel Odor?"

"Diana, Diana. I am currently on the job. And I do not recall asking you to offer any unnecessary services."

"Unnecessary? Is that what you really think?"

Her eyes narrowed and she brushed her right hand through the long hair behind her.

"You need to be more honest. We're all thinking it. That girl needs to be protected more than anyone, but she also wants it less than anyone."

"Diana, Diana. You're just guessing."

"No, I am not. It's called woman's intuition. Also…" She tilted her head and lowered her eyebrows a little. "Why are you so intent on forcing relief onto that girl? …Is it because of those scars you once gained on your arm?"

Odor did not answer. He instead loosened his tie and raised his right hand.

"Pathetic. A pathetic story."

Diana saw him slowly move his gaze throughout area.

There were smoking and flaming piles of metal on the grass. They were the wreckage of the blue mechanical dragons.

"If… If I had ignored my orders and come out here more quickly, I would not have let this happen. The same goes for those in Tokyo Bay and at the place called Chofu. …Diana, can I ask you one thing?"

“No wife would refuse her husband’s request.”

“Most of all… Most of all, it would anger me if any more life was lost. And I am worried about Heo. So, my wife, please do more than care for me as I die. Please take me to the battlefield, my wife who is the world’s greatest witch.”

“Testament.”

Diana removed her hand from her hair.

It now held scraps of paper made into a cylinder and rectangular strips.

“This is a broom. Its performance does not quite live up to the original 1st version, though.”

She swung the broom to the left.

That was when the great pressure of wind arrived.

It came from a black mechanical dragon.

The dragon measured over forty meters long and it tried to knock Diana away with its nose.

“!!”

A strike from the broom knocked it to the side.

A heavy metallic sound shook the air and the black dragon fell to the side, but it quickly hopped back up with almost feline movements.

The other black dragons reacted by growing more cautious. There were eight of them now, but…

“What should we do about this, honey? Do you want them all for yourself or are you prepared to praise your wife?”

“Then… Then how about you help me? These must be the enemy’s scouts. The main unit is likely flying this way more slowly. Even if the transport plane carrying Heo Thunderson has concept stealth, they will still show interest if they visually locate it. …I want to hurry.”

Odor raised his right arm and four blue mechanical dragons approached in combat form from down the runway behind him.

Diana spun her broom around and held the paper handle under her arm while watching their movements and the gazes of the black dragons.

“Then how about we dedicate the beginning of the fight to avenging our fallen comrades? We can dedicate the middle of the fight to the enemies being crushed and we can dedicate the end of the fight…” She smiled toward the black dragons. “To perfect happiness. How does that sound?”

Chapter 29: The Wind’s Guidance

Chapter 29

“The Wind’s Guidance”

The sound of the wind does not stop
The movement of the wind does not cease
The will of the wind…

The sound of the wind does not stop

The movement of the wind does not cease

The will of the wind…

On the right of the screen, Heo saw something charge onto the runway and approach.

After the explosion of the mechanical dragons, a seemingly impossible fact brought her feelings rushing back.

“Harakawa!?”

She stood up and ran.

She almost fell as she ran along the floor that was tilting while the transport plane prepared to ascend and she slammed her shoulder into the wall containing the door.

It hurt, but the sensation brought her to her senses.

Her feelings came back and her mind fully snapped into focus. She could not believe what was happening outside, but she had a single element that helped her to believe it.

“Harakawa!” she shouted while opening the door.

It was cold. The room’s air immediately rushed out and into the cargo hold in the back of the transport plane. The cylindrical space had rails embedded in the floor. It was five meters tall and ten meters back to front.

And a single boy stood in the center of that space: Harakawa.

…How?

How had he entered this concept space? How had he gotten aboard the plane? And…

“Why…are you here?”

“How should I know!?”

His shout made her jump.

This was something not even he knew.

…But I feel like I know. Is that feeling wrong?

She stepped out of the door. The room was placed within the cargo hold as a package, so its entrance had a height difference with the floor of the cargo hold.

By the time she descended the three aluminum steps, the tilt to the floor was gone.

She stopped about three meters in front of him.

He took in a breath and raised his head to look at her.

In that moment, an announcement filled the cargo hold.

“Emergency! Ksshh…from the east-…”

It cut out there.

A moment later, Heo’s reflexes and kinetic vision were unable to keep up with everything that happened.

The next thing she knew, the color black filled her vision.

…Eh?

That black was dotted with the color white.

She was seeing the starry sky.

…Why can I see that?

And the stars were not all she saw in the sky.

Below them were the clouds illuminated by the night scenery and below those was a black shadow. That shadow was a large airplane.

Once she recognized it as a transport plane, she mentally tilted her head. Hadn't she been riding that plane?

However, the transport plane's shape was different from before.

The cargo hold area at the "belly" of the plane had thick black lines through it. They resembled a cat scratch, but they were large enough to tear into the cargo hold.

Oh, realized Heo. *I fell from those holes.*

And…

"!?"

A flower bloomed in the sky. It was the fiery blossom of an explosion, but she could not hear that explosion.

All she heard was the static-like wind of her fall.

Her mind grasped the fact that her transport plane had been destroyed and she realized what by shortly thereafter.

To her right, she saw the color black sitting motionless between the surface and the night sky.

That stillness was the ocean far to the east and the starlight in the sky there dimly illuminated something.

…Those are…?

They were black dragons.

The visual information gave her an instinctual understanding of just how many of them there were and a chill ran down her spine. There was more than just one or a few of what she had thought were demons.

…There are dozens of even the big ones.

And at the center of the army of black dragons was a giant twin-fuselage form. That black form was noticeably larger than the others.

It can't be, her mind thought while denying what she was seeing.

Her focus was on the sight before her far more than on the fear of falling or the chill and pain of the high-altitude wind.

However, a response to her denial arrived from the east.

One black dragon in the lead suddenly rose from below.

"…!"

Its size, the fact that it was made of metal, and the air resistance were all meaningless to this black dragon.

As she fell, the black dragon passed by from below, but it turned back at the same speed. It completely ignored the laws of physics as its front right leg tore through the air and swung its claws toward her.

Heo opened her mouth to let out a meaningless scream.

"Don't cry!" said a voice.

"Harakawa!?"

Her cry was swept away by the chilly wind, but it still received a response.

Her mind had been completely focused on the black dragon, but it now turned toward the boy who was falling with his arms spread toward her.

She clung to him so forcefully she practically collided with him.

He held her in a forceful grip that was a little too tight, but she responded by clinging to him with all her might.

She would not let go.

And then the dragon's arm arrived.

She saw Harakawa turn his gaze toward that dragon. The look in his eyes showed he was not even considering the possibility of losing or faltering.

It was the same look she had seen in him all this time.

A moment later, the dragon's claws swept in.

Heo heard an intense metallic sound and lost consciousness.

Harakawa saw the black dragon's claws approaching.

And then they arrived.

"!"

A metallic sound filled the air and his body was knocked away as if tearing into the air.

But something was not right.

"…?"

He was still alive.

He felt the inertia of being knocked away and the impact of air from having his falling trajectory forcibly altered.

However, he was still alive. He felt nothing out of place in his bones and his body remained intact.

…What?

His plan had been to only save Heo. He had simply been trying to do something to save her.

But both he and the slender body in his arms were alive.

As he grew increasingly confused by his own survival, something flew up and away from them. The air resistance caused the small object to separate from them as if it had been placed in midair.

It was Harakawa's bracelet of stones that his mother had given him. It had broken, almost as if it had taken the damage of the impact in their place.

…A protective charm.

He did not really believe what his mother had said. In fact, he was more skeptical than anything. But the broken bracelet's string had snapped, so it left his arm and scattered through the sky.

The only thing he knew for sure was that they were alive.

And then the black dragon returned.

Beyond the roar of the wind, it dropped down from above.

Harakawa held Heo in his arms. She seemed to have lost consciousness as she clung to him and entrusted herself to him.

But he could feel the warmth of her body in his arms and that was all that mattered.

He did not believe they would be so lucky a second time, so he held her and tried to turn his back on the black dragon.

And in that instant, he heard a certain sound. It was a high-pitched and short electronic tone, much like when a radio was being tuned. It had a wavelike pattern and occasionally cut out, but it seemed to be trying to convey something.

What is that? he wondered as it grew shorter and its intermittence grew faster than a pulse.

"_____"

Something like a voice reached his ears.

Someone was there.

They might have been nearby, behind him, or anywhere. At any rate, that existence spoke as if expressing itself.

"I thank you for protecting her twice."

…!?

Before he could ask anything, it arrived.

Below him and behind Heo's back, it appeared.

…Wind!?

Something large and invisible appeared.

He had seen it once before that afternoon when the men in blue armored uniforms had pursued them. He recalled what had appeared as wind back then.

"A dragon!?"

Before he could receive a response, Harakawa and Heo were enveloped by that wind.

A moment later, a metallic noise rang out for the second time.

The night filled a row of mountains with bluish-black darkness.

But that darkness did not reach the valley between two of the mountains.

Light existed in place of the darkness. That bright light currently illuminated a long strip of asphalt at the bottom of the valley and a white building to its west.

Something resembling a giant bladed weapon sat on the partially broken asphalt of the runway. It was colored blue and white and it was approximately fifty meters long.

It was the Vesper Cannon.

People in blue armored uniforms surrounded that long dragon cannon on the runway and people in white armored uniforms stood in front of the entranceway to the white building.

The two sides made no attempt to approach each other. They watched each other cautiously and stayed on their guard, but a single color could be seen between the blue and white: a crimson that reflected the lights.

That color came from a red giant with no arms past the shoulders and Gyes in her red suit.

A few meters from her was a long table for a meeting that had three people around it: Sayama in his suit, Shinjou in a white shirt, and…

“Roger-kun was it?”

Sayama’s voice was directed past the table and to the indicated individual.

The man wore a three piece suit and he expressionlessly pushed his glasses up his nose.

“I never thought you would return using the flight capability of a god of war. This was not in my calculations.”

“I suppose I should say ‘testament’. All I did was find a way to shorten the three hour journey from Haneda to forty minutes even with the runway destroyed in the battle. Also, I wished to draw everyone’s attention. Of course, I intend to have Gyes-kun paid for her work as this was official business.”

“I see,” replied Roger while placing a hand on the table before him. “We just received word that Black Sun’s army is estimated to arrive here in another thirty minutes.”

“And what will you be doing with that time?”

“To be blunt…” Roger made sure his voice would reach both Sayama and the white building behind the boy. “I recommend that Japanese UCAT abandon the Leviathan Road and transfer all control to the World UCAT Alliance.”

“Do you really think we can do that?”

“Testament. And do you think you can continue with the Leviathan Road?”

Roger removed his hand from the table, lightly crossed his arms, and looked up into the night sky.

Behind him was a group of tents surrounded by men in blue armored uniforms.

That was their temporary base camp.

Some members of Japanese UCAT were inside the tents. Mikage was sitting in a seat and folding origami, Hiba sat next to her with a bandanna around his head and while muttering something about turning off a machine, and an old man was shaking the metal cage he was trapped inside.

Sayama looked across them all before answering.

“They seem to be having fun.”

“Testament. I truly did not expect them to look so happy. Needless to say, they are under our protection as long as they are in our custody. Is that okay with you?”

“It is and I do not view them as valid bargaining chips either.”

Sayama readily made that judgment and Roger nodded.

“Then let us get back on topic,” said the man. “Listen. None of 5th-Gear’s people still live and the same is true of the mechanical dragons they built. About sixty years ago, those dragons all transformed into the Vesper Cannon, but at that time, they left all authority with a single individual: Mr. Richard Thunderson.”

And…

“In the instructions left before his death, Mr. Thunderson left all of those rights with American UCAT. Do you understand what that means?”

“I do,” answered Sayama while brushing his right hand through his hair. “You are saying as follows: if we wish to continue the Leviathan Road with 5th-Gear, our negotiations must be with American UCAT. And American UCAT refuses to accept the Leviathan Road. …Isn’t that right?”

Shinjou gasped when she heard that and Roger replied by uncrossing his arms, placing his right hand on his chest, and bowing.

“Testament. Do you see any room for negotiation, Leviathan Road negotiator?”

Harakawa was in the night sky.

From there, the lights on the surface looked like grains of sand.

However, three things about the situation were odd.

“…”

First, they had been attacked by that black dragon just a moment ago, but they were still alive.

Second, he was holding Heo in the sky, but they were not falling.

And third, he was sitting in an invisible seat and he could see the sky in all directions.

“We’re flying…but where to!?”

Instead of fading into the sky, his shout was reflected back from quite close by. That fact let him guess that he was inside some small space. He was inside a moving space that was surrounded by invisible walls.

But even as he grasped that and calmed down, the situation continued to advance.

Whatever it was he was sitting in was accelerating to the east and the sky ahead was filled with black shapes darker even than the night.

It was an army of black dragons.

The biggest shape of all sat in the middle like an island and he was being brought toward it.

“Hey! Can you hear me!?”

Harakawa held Heo’s unconscious form close to free his legs and he kicked at the space in front of him.

He could not see it, but there was definitely something like a table there.

The recoil of the kick pushed his back against the invisible seat and he began to look around.

“Show yourself. What do you think you’re doing!?”

Just before this strange space had taken them in, he had heard a voice. The male voice had sounded like it was coming over a radio.

He did not fully understand, but Harakawa guessed that someone was controlling this space. He looked forward at the group of black that they were approaching and that was approaching them.

“Are you going to fight!?”

After that shouted question, he felt a slight shaking. The invisible seat he sat in and the air of the space had vibrated a little.

It was almost as if something had noticed its hesitation and grown afraid.

Harakawa frowned at that shaking and he placed his feet on the invisible table he had kicked as if guarding against the black dragons approaching from the front. He braced his legs against that front surface and…

“Hey.”

He spoke to the fear he had sensed.

He spoke to whatever was flying toward those black dragons despite feeling fear.

“Who are you?”

He did receive a response.

“_____”

There were no words, but he heard a breath. And so he spoke again while tensing up as the details of the black shapes grew visible.

“Who are you and what’s your connection to Heo?”

The name he included in his question seemed to act as a trigger. As soon as the girl’s name filled the air, Harakawa felt the same hesitant and fearful shaking as before.

“I do not know.”

Awkward yet fluent words reached his mind rather than his ears.

He did not understand any of what was happening, but he shook his head to throw out the trivial questions. There was something else he had to say here.

“You don’t know, but you’re still going to fight!? Can you win against all of them!?”

The voice did not reply, but they accelerated.

Directly ahead was a twin-fuselage form. It looked like two flying aircraft carriers facing them. In the center, a draconic form used the twin-fuselage like wings.

It was a giant black mechanical dragon.

As they approached it, the surrounding dragons took action. They flew in front of the larger dragon to protect it.

In response, whatever was carrying Harakawa and Heo flew straight forward.

Are you suicidal? thought Harakawa, but he realized what was happening a moment later.

…Are you going to avoid them!?

It was not quite on the level of a motorcycle, but the movements of what carried them seemed to be controlled by balance rather than by a steering wheel or rudder.

Unlike simply turning a steering wheel, the body of a motorcycle was banked to tilt the weight on the front and back wheels as it raced along the road. Whatever was carrying them flew through the sky in much the same way.

It flipped its body around to slip between the smaller black dragons approaching from the front.

“…!”

It almost seemed to dance as it bounced its body off the air and continued on.

Its movements helped Harakawa realize the length and shape of this craft.

It was…

“A dragon!?”

“I do not know.”

He heard that voice and the blowing wind, but he heard neither with his ears. The sound of the wind reached his mind along with the speaker’s voice.

“I know nothing. I know that, but I do not know.”

“Not even your name? And can you not show yourself!?”

“I have no name. That is why I do not know. And…I cannot show myself. Not while I fly through the sky like this.”

“Not while you fly through the sky like this? You mean…”

Harakawa looked around him.

Something invisible was located past Heo who was taking the gentle breaths of sleep.

This voice belonged to what was located there. However, it was invisible and it had not shown itself.

…Is this some kind of anime?

However, the sights around him and the sound of wind did more than enough to tell him this was real.

As the invisible dragon flew about, it struck the air with the sound of a breaking wave. And the impacts had enough force to shake the seat.

But even as the wave-like sound of the wind continued, the wind dragon raced onward. Faster than the coming dragons, it slipped past their claws, evaded their tackles, and accelerated as if pushing them backwards.

It made it through.

It flew in front of the largest black mechanical dragon. It was less than two hundred meters from the tips of the enemy's twin-fuselage wings.

And just after arriving so close, Harakawa saw light.

Light had appeared only a few meters in front of them. That was likely the location of their dragon's mouth.

With the sound of bursting wind, a blast was fired from the invisible mouth.

The dragon fired while still accelerating forward.

The white light instantly spread to ten meters thick after being fired and flew on at that width.

The dragon continued firing for two seconds.

The light had actual weight and it formed a giant pillar directed at the black dragon located at the center of the twin-fuselage wings.

And the dragon carrying them flew after the light.

It shot forward to make up for the acceleration lost from the recoil of the blast and it tried to fly between the wings.

But then the large black mechanical dragon fired.

The first sign of that attack appeared in the space between the twin-fuselage wings.

Those wings were nearly six hundred meters long and black lightning appeared in the thirty meter wide gap between them. And that lightning seemed to form a mesh.

The collection of black light between the twin-fuselage wings tore into the white light.

That white pillar of light was unable to pass through the gap. The black mesh wrapped around it, pierced through it, and tore it to pieces.

"…!"

Finally, the pillar burst and scattered.

It all happened in an instant. Once the white light had scattered like snow in the wind, only the black lightning remained.

After eliminating the white light, the black lightning quickly expanded and formed eight shaking pillars of light that seemed to connect the twin towers that were the wings.

Next, even more black light was added.

At the very back, the black dragon opened its body downwards.

This revealed a long cannon that extended straight out from the armor covering the bottom of the dragon.

The cannon resembled a blade and it extended until it was longer than the dragon itself.

Meanwhile, the dragon carrying Harakawa and Heo simply accelerated in a straight line.

"Hey!"

"I am sorry," said the voice. "I do not know. I do not know. I want to know, but I do not!"

The wind dragon slipped past a black pillar of light that trembled and moved like a whip.

It slipped past a second and third and once more gathered light in the air where its mouth was.

But that was as far as it got.

Harakawa realized that Heo had woken in his arms. She shook as if her pulse was being expressed in her motions and she reflexively raised her head.

“…!?”

She looked at him, but after only a moment, she faced forward. She could see them soaring between the black metal twin-fuselage wings and she could see the black dragon up ahead.

“N-…”

Her eyes opened wide and her voice rang out. With no hesitation whatsoever, she gave a cry of rejection.

“————!!”

Harakawa held her tight in an attempt to restrain her trembling voice. She struggled with more strength than he had expected from a girl and restraining her back and forth shaking was the most he could manage.

Soon, the end arrived.

An attack came from the front.

It was a blast of black light.

Tokyo was deserted inside the concept space.

In the city center, some automatons had left the Kanda Laboratory to maintain the concept space creation terminals.

A few of them watched the battle in the sky above the Chiyoda region.

The large black mechanical dragon with its twin-fuselage wings was fighting some invisible opponent.

As the concept space communication facility had yet to be completed, they could not inform the rest of UCAT what they were seeing.

However, they could make scans from their multiple viewpoints and send those to their fellow automatons via their shared memory.

Something invisible had attacked Black Sun.

Black Sun had fired its main cannon.

Even with what was likely a low power shot, Black Sun's main cannon had an effective range of 21.1 kilometers.

The invisible object had avoided the blast at close range, but it had fallen in the eastern sky.

The estimated location of its fall was the center of Tokyo Bay.

It had almost certainly fallen into the ocean and sunk.

After they informed the others of all that, something shook the sky.

"_____!!"

A giant beast gave a cry estimated to be of joy and it lasted for a full three minutes and eighteen seconds.

With the trailing notes of that joy still ringing in their auditory devices, all of the automatons connected to their shared memory and gave a single report.

“Black Sun is advancing to the west.”

Chapter 30: Preemptive Truth

Chapter 30

“Preemptive Truth”

Make your will known
Both when you have something
And when you have nothing

Make your will known

Both when you have something

And when you have nothing

Light illuminated the night with the dark mountains in the background.

On the asphalt between a long runway and a white building, a long meeting table cast a shadow by the roundabout in front of the building.

Three people cast shadows with the table between them.

One was a foreigner in a suit.

The tall man faced the other two through his glasses. One was a boy in a suit and the other a girl in a white shirt.

“Now, Sayama and Shinjou. You may have only just returned, but I would like to receive an answer.”

The boy in a suit, Sayama, turned a sharp gaze toward him.

“And what do you mean by an answer, Roger-kun?”

“As I have already said, I refer to the cessation of the Leviathan Road with 5th-Gear.”

Roger reached into his pocket as he spoke.

All those in white armored uniforms by the building prepared their various weapons, but Roger ignored the many metallic noises and removed his hand from his pocket.

Shinjou stated what he now held.

“An envelope?”

“Testament. The letter inside contains the instructions Mr. Richard Thunderson gave us. He provided us with the full authority he received from 5th-Gear and it is our reason for stopping the Leviathan Road.”

Roger placed the white envelope on the table and then returned his hand to his pocket.

He then pulled out a small black device.

“May I activate this tape recorder? I would like to record your answer and everything leading up to it.”

Roger placed the tape recorder on the table.

The old recorder made a hard clunk as it reached the table and the recording switch was already activated.

The only sound was the quiet one of the tape spinning.

Roger pushed his glasses up his nose, looked first at everyone gathered by the white building, and then turned to the boy before him.

Sayama had a sharp yet expressionless look in his eyes, but Roger faced it with something completely different.

He smiled and narrowed his eyes.

“According to our investigation, the Leviathan Road’s negotiator has recorded conversations for his negotiations. I thought I would save you the trouble while also leaving proof for future use.”

“You seem to be slightly mistaken.”

“And how is that?”

“That is not for my negotiations. It is my hobby.”

Next to Sayama, Shinjou's knees collapsed underneath her as if the strings supporting her had snapped.

But she quickly recovered and grabbed at him.

"S-stop that, Sayama-kun! This is being recorded!"

"What are you talking about, Shinjou-kun? I merely avoided leaving a misunderstanding in the records of someone such as myself whose name is sure to go down in history."

Shinjou smiled and nodded twice before turning to Roger.

"Can you delete that?"

"I cannot."

This time, she fully fell to her knees.

Sayama and the small creature on his head glanced over at her, but soon returned their gaze to Roger.

"Well then," he began. "How about we begin?"

Hearing Sayama speak, Shinjou looked up while sitting on the ground.

Begin? she thought. *What is there to discuss?*

…They have that letter.

Her question drove her to stand and she saw Sayama with his arms crossed and head slightly tilted.

"Could you take out that letter and read it once more?"

"Why? I believe its contents are already known."

Sayama reached his left hand into his pocket.

Those in blue armored uniforms on the runway aimed their weapons at him.

The metallic sounds of weapons being prepared reached him, but Sayama did not care and he did not remove his hand from his pocket.

“Roger-kun? You discussed Mr. Richard’s transfer of authority before producing the tape recorder. That leaves a certain possibility.”

Shinjou realized what he was trying to say, so she said it in his place.

“He was trying to record us accepting the end of the Leviathan Road without recording the part about the transfer of authority? But then…”

“Yes. It is possible the transfer of Mr. Richard Thunderson’s authority is false. This document may have been a fake even as it was read yesterday. That might be why he tried to record our promise without leaving any records of the falsehood.”

Sayama looked up at Roger with his hand still in his pocket.

“But surely you were not attempting such a poor trick. Right, Roger-kun? As previously stated, producing a fake would be an eternal embarrassment. …Still, I would simply like to go back over the document.”

“That is a lot of suspicion against the truth-loving American UCAT.”

Roger’s line was meant to leave a record of his discomfort at being a target of such suspicion. In other words, he would not hold back if he was proven right.

But Sayama ignored the enemy’s attempt to hold him in check.

“Read it. I want this tape recorder to record that these are the words of Mr. Richard Thunderson. Oh, and one other thing.”

Sayama finally pulled his left hand from his pocket.

“To aid my hobby, how about we each record this conversation?”

He placed a handheld recorder on the table and it was already switched on.

If Roger was now unable to read the contents of the envelope, it would mean those contents were false and he could not allow them to be recorded.

Meanwhile, the envelope remained on the table and Roger did not touch it.

“Let us make a bet, negotiator.”

He brought his hands into his suit’s sleeve and pulled out a small metal case.

“I have not shown it to you, but you could call this my weapon. It contains a concept to show others a false reality, but I will set it aside. I have no need for it here.”

Shinjou looked at the case and at Roger with an upturned glance.

“How do we know you haven’t already used it?”

The answer came from her left.

“Do not worry,” said Gyes. “I have been watching and that case is the only philosopher’s stone reading around him.”

“I see,” said Shinjou with a nod.

It was possible even Gyes’s statement was part of the false reality, but she would have stopped the man if he had actually tried something. She would not have allowed him to even move an arm.

Roger then nodded and pointed at the case he had placed on the table.

“In my dreams, you will wake once you realize that it is a dream.”

As Roger spoke, Sayama slowly reached over to grope Shinjou’s breasts.

His fingers seemed to check the elasticity and shape and he nodded.

“Not even a dream based on my memories could replicate this sensation! Ergo, this is reality!”

An uppercut shook the body of the boy who had groped her. He and Baku on his head turned toward her.

“Wh-what was that for!?”

“Did that wake you up?”

She pointed toward Roger who was looking back with a blank expression.

“That is an unusual method of checking.”

“It is quite normal for Shinjou-kun and me. We do it all the time. …This is being recorded, right? We. Do. It. All. The. Time. Oh, how delightful! That is all. …Now, let us set aside such complicated things and continue with the simple negotiation.”

“…”

“What is that glare for, Shinjou-kun? But it too is wonderful. Anyway, Roger-kun, you raised your bet by setting aside your weapon, didn’t you? You are saying the contents of the envelope are real, so if our doubts our proven wrong, we cannot forget the good faith you showed us.”

“That is one way of looking at it,” agreed Roger.

However, Sayama continued as if it were perfectly natural.

“Then we shall raise our bet as well. That bet being on our doubt. …If you are telling the truth and all of 5th-Gear’s authority truly lies with American UCAT… Oh, I know. I will go right ahead and say it.”

Sayama did not hesitate.

“We will give up all rights to the Leviathan Road.”

Roger heard what Sayama said.

…Is he stupid!?

The boy's confidence came from his certainty that the document was a fake and that certainty was entirely based in the timing at which Roger had produced the tape recorder.

…But the letter inside the envelope is real.

The signature was in Thunderson's handwriting and it was stamped with his official seal. If a 1st-Gear concept was used, it could be conceptually proven to be written by him.

In truth, the timing of the tape recorder had been a gamble on Roger's part.

He had a single job as Odor's aide.

He was to act as negotiator instead of Odor who was a terrible speaker.

He had known he would be facing the Leviathan Road's negotiator during this visit to Japan. Odor had volunteered to command the attack on Japanese UCAT and the battle against the black dragon and Roger had received only one order from him.

…I am to use whatever means necessary to get Japanese UCAT to accept Thunderson's instructions.

The instructions were real, so the outcome was already determined. Even if Sayama attempted to cheat in some way, they had been taken directly to this table on arrival and they had not spoken with their comrades in the building behind them. Forming up on the runway and creating an obvious stalemate had been a method of forcing Sayama and Shinjou to step in as mediators without having a chance to discuss anything.

That had worked well.

The automaton in a red suit that controlled the god of war they had flown in on did not appear to be a maid type, so she would be unable to communicate over their shared memory. Also, the concept space communication facility in Kanda was not yet up and running and the shared consciousness of the 4th-Gear resident with them could not communicate over such long distances.

They had been brought to the negotiating table without gaining any information or discussing anything within the concept space.

Roger's victory was assured, so he had decided to play a bit of a game. Since he could not lose, the point of the game was to see how his opponent would react.

He had expected a clever opponent to guess that Roger's victory was unshakable and either back off or negotiate for a decent compromise.

Roger was willing to admit the value of an enemy commander who would retreat when the situation called for it. Depending on how things played out, he had even considered placing Japanese UCAT as second-in-command as American UCAT led the effort to release the concepts.

…But I never expected him to be this reckless.

He had fallen for the tape recorder trick and then clung that one point so much that he had raised his bet to giving up the Leviathan Road.

Raising the bet had likely been meant to intimidate Roger. He thought Roger's card was a fake, so he was making an implied threat.

…He is telling me to back off while I still can.

At that point, Roger gave a bitter laugh. And not just in his heart.

Sayama and Shinjou gave him puzzled looks, so he contained the laugh and replied.

"My apologies."

He then decided to reveal the answer. He reached out toward the envelope to remove the letter.

“Wait just a moment, Roger-kun. You have not given your bet.”

Sayama’s arms were crossed and his sharp gaze looked up at Roger.

“Surely you do not think your bet of a single weapon is equivalent to the bet I just made.”

I see, thought Roger as he withdrew his hand. *Yes. Even if I know I will win, I should play the game properly.*

As he tried to come up with a bet, Sayama opened his mouth again.

“But I am feeling generous, so how about I raise my bet even further. How about this? If American UCAT truly has full authority concerning 5th, I will also transfer a full set of Japanese UCAT facilities to American UCAT.”

“A full set of your facilities?”

Roger looked up and saw Sayama. Shinjou was looking at him with a look of utter shock.

“What is it, Roger-kun? I do not particularly enjoy having men stare at me.”

Sayama raised his right hand such that a noise came from his elbow and he hid his face behind that hand.

“Oh, my apologies. I forgot that America is a country that respects freedom and any number of preferences. It was rude of me to speak out against your preference. …However, I have already devoted myself to Shinjou-kun, so give up.”

Roger averted his gaze and did his best to ignore everything the boy said.

Sayama exaggeratedly swung down his hand to send wind down on the table, but he did not look down at the envelope as the wind reached it.

And so Roger continued to ignore him while bringing a hand to his forehead and thinking about what to bet.

But…

“Oh, wait a moment, Roger-kun. It seems my hospitality as a Japanese person was lacking. It also seems I have not said enough, so let me raise the bet even further. …If full authority over 5th-Gear lies with American UCAT, I will also transfer you the rights to everything developed by Japanese UCAT.”

“Wait,” said Roger on reflex.

…This is odd.

Where did this boy’s ridiculous confidence come from?

Roger knew his victory was assured, so he had proof that the boy’s confidence was nothing more than a bluff. However, this level of confidence was too much.

As he thought, he heard a voice. Still expressionless, Sayama tapped a finger on the table as if he were nervous.

“Roger-kun, one thing. Just one thing. Can you answer me a quick question?”

“What is it?”

“It is a simple matter, Roger-kun.” Sayama gave one hard flick of the table. “Let us say the letter in that envelope is real, but we had brought a truth that completely overturns it and we had a way of swapping out the contents of the envelope. What would you say then?”

“That is not-…”

He trailed off before saying “possible”.

Sayama’s handheld recorder had disappeared from the table.

No, it had not disappeared. It was being hidden.

“Some slight optical camouflage is distorting the light around the recorder, Roger-kun. 5th-Gear’s dragons use optical stealth and Miyako-kun created a handheld version to show everyone an example to help fight back against it. So just watch.”

A small creature had appeared on the table next to the envelope at some point.

It was Baku. Its legs were sprawled out as if sleeping, but it had supposedly been on Sayama’s head just a moment before.

“I placed him in my sleeve while covering my face and placed him here when I lowered my hand. I set the optical stealth philosopher’s stone on the recorder when I flicked the table afterwards. …Now, what has happened to the contents of the envelope?”

Roger knew what Sayama meant.

He was saying he could have switched out the contents at any time.

…But that is not possible.

Even with an invisibility philosopher’s stone and even if he had the skill to move Baku without Roger noticing, Roger would have noticed if he had tried to tamper with the envelope.

Roger let out a breath to calm himself and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“If you did swap out the envelope’s contents, that fact will remain in the recording.”

“Then let me say this: I swear on the god of freedom and justice that I did not swap out the envelope’s contents.”

…I see.

Roger looked to the envelope and then Sayama while he thought. The boy was doing everything he could to overturn the situation.

However, he would have had to tamper with the envelope to alter its contents.

Roger's own eyes told him that had not happened and so he concluded there was nothing to worry about.

But then…

"Oops."

For some reason, Sayama tripped toward the table and it was clearly done on purpose.

Roger sensed danger in how Sayama held his hands out toward the table.

"Don't move!!"

As Roger shouted, help came from an unexpected place: Shinjou.

"W-wait. Are you okay, Sayama-kun?"

She frantically held him from the side to stop his fall.

He was stopped and lifted up before he hit the table and he thanked her.

"Thank you. It seems my overwork is catching up to me."

A blatant lie, thought Roger as he sighed and lowered his gaze.

He then noticed something new on the table.

"…"

It was a piece of paper. The folded copy paper had text printed on it.

However, Roger could not read it because an information restriction concept had been applied to it.

…That is a 1st-Gear concept used by all UCATs these days.

At that point, Roger recalled that 1st-Gear had joined the enemy.

…They have writing concepts, including those more complete than we have ever seen.

Sayama spoke while looking down at the fallen document.

“Oh, dear. I dropped an important document from my pocket. I need to be careful. After all, if this document were written with 1st-Gear’s writing concepts, it could affect other writings. It would be a disaster if its writing replaced any other documents it happened to fall on.”

The boy’s words made Roger tremble in his heart.

…Can he rewrite the text inside the envelope using a concept?

Impossible. Do not worry, he told himself. *I have never heard of such a concept.*

…But at the same time…

Japanese UCAT had won over 1st-Gear, which was the center of writing concepts.

“Roger-kun, why are you being so quiet? Are you tired? I can imagine you are. After all, your single decision here will decide the future of Colonel Odor and the rest of American UCAT,” said Sayama. “You cannot let a careless assumption or reckless decision based on ignorance bring harm to American UCAT. With some things, simply saying you did not know is not enough. …Being a negotiator is not easy.”

“…”

The boy was laying on the pressure.

Roger understood that and he understood he had no way of knowing whether a 1st-Gear writing concept had been used or not.

So partially as a way of brushing aside that pressure, he picked up the unreadable paper that had fallen to the table. And he did so before Sayama could reach for the table himself.

Roger slightly disturbed the air as he held out the paper.

But Sayama did not immediately take it. After a pause, he nodded and did so.

“Thank you for collecting that for me.”

“No need to thank me. We prepared the table, after all.”

Sayama nodded again, opened the document, read through it, and opened his mouth.

“Would you look at that. This says full authority over 5th-Gear will be left with American UCAT!”

“!?”

His words intensified the silence of the surrounding area.

Wondering what had happened, everyone stood up and audibly prepared their weapons, but Sayama continued loudly.

“Just kidding!!”

His follow-up statement made everyone immediately wilt.

All strength left them and they sat down, but they then turned even more focus in the negotiators’ direction.

With all that attention reaching them, Sayama looked across the white building and runway before shrugging.

“It seems you all need to work on your sense of humor.”

Next to him, Shinjou peered at the paper in his hand and frowned.

“This…isn’t what was in the envelope, is it?”

“Now, now, Shinjou-kun. I did not swap anything out. I would never divert everyone’s attention by pretending to trip and then have Baku conceptually swap out only the text,” he said. “Even so, Baku is quite attached to me. Look.”

He raised his right arm so Baku could see and the creature copied the action.

Sayama then took another action: he moved as if tripping onto the table.

Baku copied him by collapsing toward the opening of the envelope before him.

…The creature is moving to pull out the contents with its front legs!

Sayama then gave an expressionless comment.

“If Baku were given a philosopher’s stone to hide his movements, he would make a top-class spy.”

It can’t be, thought Roger as he looked down at Baku.

The creature sensed his gaze and turned around.

Roger then saw a blue philosopher’s stone on a pendant around Baku’s neck.

“Wh-what concept is that!?”

“It looks good on him, doesn’t it? That is simply a decoration for a pet, Roger-kun. Giving him a philosopher’s stone with a spying concept is unthinkable. …And let me tell you three things, Roger-kun.”

“And what might those be?”

“First of all…”

Sayama raised his index finger and Baku copied the action.

“Surely you are not doubting me after I have repeatedly insisted I did nothing.”

And…

“Second, let us raise the bet further, Roger-kun. If full authority over 5th-Gear lies with American UCAT, Japanese UCAT here in Okutama and the rest of UCAT throughout Japan will assist American UCAT’s actions free of charge.”

Also…

“Third, it would seem you are having difficulty finding a good idea for raising your end of the bet. I am much like a god, so I can make bet after bet like this, but you seem unable to find an answer with your level of authority. To help you, I will request a bet that I know you can grant.”

“What is that?”

“It is simple. I can make some guesses based on your age, your skill with the Japanese language, and the fact that you were sent here. So if that envelope does not grant American UCAT with Mr. Thunderson’s authority…”

Sayama turned his sharp eyes toward Roger.

“Tell me everything you know about UCAT’s blank period.”

Roger gasped at Sayama's request.

That final request was something he had to avoid at all costs.

Therefore, he needed to open the envelope and read the contents to provide the answer.

…Because it is true that Mr. Thunderson transferred all of his authority!

However, the boy was suspicious.

Roger would definitely win this negotiation. The document inside was real, so his absolute advantage could not be shaken.

But a risk arose from a "what if" scenario. What if the document had been switched out or rewritten?

This was being recorded. In fact, he had been the one to record it.

And at the beginning of the negotiation, Shinjou had asked, "He was trying to record us accepting the end of the Leviathan Road without recording the part about the transfer of authority?"

If the document turned out to be a fake, it would support Shinjou's suspicions.

He could accuse them of switching it out, but the real one was unlikely to return after it fell into enemy hands and just how many people would believe him?

Only he and Odor knew that the document was real. No one else had actually seen it for themselves.

An inspection with a 1st-Gear concept could determine who had written it, but it was all over if the enemy had a way of escaping that and 1st-Gear was likely to side with the Leviathan Road anyway.

…It all falls down to "what ifs".

He knew for a fact that he was in the right, but for some reason, he felt like he was making a gamble. He was right, yet he was gambling.

He began to wonder where everything had gone wrong. Hiding the recorder with the optical camouflage philosopher's stone, placing Baku near the envelope, and dropping the paper from his pocket had all been small things.

Any one of them could have been ignored.

But what if they carried everything in a different direction when put together?

"…"

Roger frowned for the first time in this negotiation.

The enemy was asking him to break his silence on UCAT's blank period if he lost.

…But…

"Can you not do it?" asked Sayama as if tempting him. "Then why not accept the Leviathan Road? Do that…and at the very least, we will be stuck investigating the blank period on our own. After all, I have recently started to think it is related to the Leviathan Road."

That was something Roger could not do. His higher ups in American UCAT had already decided they could not accept the Leviathan Road.

But at the same time…

…I cannot break my silence on the blank period.

I simply cannot, he realized. *No one remains with the authority to tell the whole story of that time.*

Roger brought a groan up in his throat.

"…"

But he looked up into the sky and forced it back down.

His gaze moved up the white building in front of him. The building had lights installed here and there.

On the roof at the very top, he saw the white edge he had been pushed from the previous night and he saw two figures standing there.

One was a gray-haired middle-aged man in a black suit and the other was a gray-haired woman in a maid uniform.

The middle-aged man looked down with a cane in hand and he pushed his sunglasses up his nose.

His mouth moved and formed words. Roger could not hear him, but he was able to read his lips.

“Put your mind at ease, Roger Sully.”

Those words were the final push.

Roger forcefully lowered his gaze toward Sayama’s expressionless face and raised his eyebrows.

“American UCAT trusts in our own justice and freedom.”

He reached for the envelope.

“Those two virtues will guide us to the truth! And thus the truth is on our side!!”

He pulled out the letter, opened it, and read it aloud.

“ ‘If I, Richard Thunderson, die or go missing, I leave all authority I hold at the time to American UCAT. September 15, 2005.’ ”

Roger realized the document was still the real one.

Shinjou doubted her ears when she heard Roger.

For an instant, she could not understand what he was saying. After all…

…We…lost?

Sayama had used so many tricks and said so much, but the contents were real.

She asked herself what was happening, but she honestly could not find an answer.

Roger had completely won and all the bets Sayama had made would be passed over to him.

She must not have been the only one confused because there was no reaction from the white building behind her.

And oddly enough, those in blue up ahead also failed to react.

It was as if they doubted their own victory.

Even Roger frowned as he looked at the letter.

At that point, Shinjou heard a sound. It was the loud, dry, and repeating sound of clapping.

And it came from Sayama.

He was expressionlessly clapping his hands toward Roger and the sound echoed off the white wall of the building.

“Well done. Well done indeed, Roger-kun. Even if the enemy has laid a trap, American UCAT will persist and use their justice and freedom to reach the truth. That makes you a follower of the truth and a foolish yet brave challenger. And that is what has carried you to this result. That result being…”

He made his declaration.

“Your loss.”

Roger doubted his ears when he heard Sayama.

For an instant, he could not understand what the boy was saying. After all…

…Our…loss?

Sayama had used so many tricks and said so much, but the contents had been real.

He asked himself what was happening, but he honestly could not find an answer.

He had completely won and all the bets Sayama had made would be passed over to him. So how did that constitute his loss?

He must not have been the only one confused because there was no reaction from the runway behind him or the white building in front of him.

Even Shinjou frowned as she looked to Sayama from the side.

"It is a simple matter," said Sayama. "Before entering this concept space, we were pursuing Heo Thunderson. And before leaving Shimane, Kazami gave me a certain piece of information during her periodic report. She said a delinquent classmate of mine seemed likely to head out to retrieve Heo Thunderson."

"What about it?"

"This afternoon, American UCAT was stopped by that delinquent boy while trying to secure Heo Thunderson. At that time, the two of them were snatched up by Black Sun or something similar and taken into the eastern sky."

That was true, but they still did not know what it had been. If a dragon was assisting people, Roger wanted to say it was a survivor of 5th-Gear, but that conflicted with what Richard Thunderson had said.

…He said White Creation and the other dragons combined with the Vesper Cannon and that Xolotl 3 is no more.

But Sayama continued speaking.

“What if there is a survivor of 5th-Gear and that dragon has been left with Heo Thunderson along with full authority over 5th? And couldn’t you say Richard Thunderson wrote his instructions with that in mind? He said that if he dies or goes missing, he leaves ‘all authority I hold at the time’ to American UCAT. Why did he not specify his *authority over 5th-Gear*?”

“You can’t mean…”

“All of 5th-Gear has already been transferred from Mr. Richard to Heo Thunderson via that mechanical dragon! *Mr. Richard’s authority is no longer 5th-Gear’s authority.* He only left you with his records and assets so you could protect Heo Thunderson!”

The boy took a breath.

“Take Richard Thunderson’s authority, American UCAT! We on the other hand wish to speak with Heo Thunderson who he left 5th-Gear’s authority with in the form of a mechanical dragon!”

Roger struck the table at Sayama’s shout.

The sound of his clenched fist rang loudly through the air and Baku was knocked into the air and flipped over, but Roger paid him no heed.

“That is simply untrue!”

“Have you checked?”

“There is no need. The mechanical dragons of 5th-Gear gave Mr. Richard Thunderson full authority and he told us they are no more. You claim another mechanical dragon exists, but why would that be!? How can a mechanical dragon exist when none exist!?”

“Then listen,” said a voice.

It came from Sayama across the table and Shinjou tensed her shoulders next to him.

“I have many questions concerning 5th-Gear, including that transfer of authority. Even when it comes to Black Sun and the fall of 5th’s people, there are just too many uncertainties! We must answer those questions before we continue!”

Sayama turned to Shinjou who looked surprised by his words.

“This is a gamble, Shinjou-kun. Will my optimism win or will America’s pessimism win?”

“What do you mean it’s a gamble, Sayama-kun? And what questions are there about Black Sun or 5th’s destruction?”

He did not immediately reply. He first looked away from her and toward Roger.

But he did not stop there. He looked across everyone present.

“A mechanical dragon flew into the sky after saving a girl and the delinquent boy who tried to protect her. And now, that delinquent boy is again trying to save her. If the girl answers, that dragon is sure to appear once more.”

He took a breath.

“Listen, great nation that wields the justice of adults and provides the freedom of protection and order. That dragon stands in a place of truth. A place of truth sought by a demon-possessed girl and a delinquent boy.”

Sayama lowered his gaze to the creature sitting next to the letter Roger had placed back on the table.

Baku had already raised his front legs in preparation to bring forth the past.

Chapter 31: The Human Dragon’s Will

Chapter 31

“The Human Dragon’s Will”

Say goodbye
Split apart
And understand

Say goodbye

Split apart

And understand

Harakawa heard someone crying.

It was the quiet sound of someone sobbing while desperately trying to stay quiet.

As that voice reached his mind, Harakawa wondered why he was hearing it.

His thoughts asked to playback his memories and that brought his other senses rushing back.

He had apparently passed out.

…Twice in one day. That's pretty sad.

He opened his eyes, but he was surrounded by the color black and wondered if he had gone blind.

From what he remembered, he and Heo had been riding an invisible dragon which had instinctually faced the enemy while saying it did not understand anything.

…And it was shot down.

He thought they had only avoided the black dragon's final attack because Heo had woken. When she had given her cry of rejection, their dragon had hesitated.

And that hesitation had avoided a direct hit. Still, they had been knocked away and their excess flight speed had taken them eastward.

"And we fell in the ocean. So is this the ocean floor?"

He then felt something move on his chest. It was Heo and she was clinging to his T-shirt.

“Hey, Heo Thunderson. Please don’t drool on my clothes.”

“I-I didn’t do that.”

She tried to sound defiant, but her voice shook. She apparently tried to get up, but she also apparently did not have it in her to leave his arms.

He was definitely sitting in something. The seat had him almost lying down and it felt like the one’s he had seen in the base’s F-16s. When he stretched out his legs, he could feel them reach the bottom of something like a table.

He turned his head to either side. His vision was still filled with darkness, but his eyes seemed to have adjusted because he could sense a bit of light.

“…?”

He removed his right arm from Heo and reached toward the light source. He found a soft cloth material.

“Ah, w-wait Harakawa! Just because it’s dark d-d-d-d-doesn’t mean-…!”

“Stop getting worked up over misunderstandings, Heo Thunderson. Now, about your necklace…”

The faint light was enough to see Heo raise her head in confusion.

The stone necklace she wore was wrapped in light. Blue light.

“This thing isn’t radioactive, is it?”

“I-It can’t be. My mom wouldn’t leave me something dangerous.”

“It is a philosopher’s stone,” said a voice.

Harakawa recognized it as the dragon’s voice and he looked around.

“A philosopher’s stone? …No, that doesn’t matter. Where are you?”

“I am here, but I am not with you. That is all I know.”

With that, the voice fell silent as if this was not its place.

Even after the span of a few breaths, the voice did not continue. Whether relieved or worried by that, Heo tilted her head.

“U-um, what was that voice?”

“Your savior apparently. It has no name, but it’s a dragon. Crazy, isn’t it?”

It was too dark to see each other’s expressions, but he still wondered what look was on his face.

“This invisible dragon saved you when those guys in blue attacked this afternoon and when you fell from the transport plane just now.”

“Um,” began Heo while further tilting her head. “Harakawa, did you hit your head?”

“Can you really say that after all the nonsense you asked me to believe, Heo Thunderson?”

“B-but it was only a demon that was with me. There wasn’t an attacking dragon and a saving dragon. Why did we start talking about an invisible dragon? And does that mean the darkness around us is the bottom of the ocean we can see through the dragon’s body?”

“That’s the only explanation I can think of. You remember falling, don’t you? Well, look around you. We’re most likely in the cockpit of a completely invisible dragon. Right now, we’re at the bottom of the ocean just like you said. Or if we’re unlucky, this might be Tokyo Bay’s famous toxic sludge.”

“Th-then if this really is a dragon…and it really is with me to save me…”

He could feel the movement of her chest as she gulped a bit.

“Was it this dragon that killed my mom?”

It couldn’t have been, thought Harakawa.

Thinking back on its two appearances today, the dragon had always appeared to save Heo. And in the sky, it had thanked him for protecting her twice. That had likely been because he had protected her before the dragon could.

But the dragon gave a different answer to her question.

“It was.”

As the voice quietly filled the cockpit, Harakawa froze in place and Heo shrank down.

She took a new breath and prepared to say something, but Harakawa asked a question before she could.

“Is that really true?”

“It is.”

His question and the dragon’s response stopped Heo. The strength gathered in her body grew to a tremor.

“…”

Something was about to burst from her, but just before it did, the dragon spoke.

“I contain reproduced 5th-Gear concepts. He was evolving and repairing himself, but he sensed that faint signal and pursued it. That was when I first awoke, but…”

There was a slight pause.

“I did not make it in time. By the time I appeared and drove away Black Sun who did not know what he was, Heo’s mother had already passed away. …That is the same as killing her. She was attacked by an enemy pursuing me and I did not save her in time.”

“But…”

Harakawa could tell Heo had lowered her head.

He decided to let her speak because he thought this at least was necessary.

“But…that can’t be. You mean…without you, my mom wouldn’t have died?”

There was no need to ask. It was true. That was why the dragon was apologizing and making no attempt to excuse it.

She then pressed her forehead against his chest.

“No…”

Her trembling body breathed in again and opened its mouth.

“Please leave. You don’t have to come save me, so please leave! You’re a machine, aren’t you? Then throw a switch and leave! Besides, how can you even save me!? You couldn’t stand up to that black dragon just now! That’s why my mom died, so…so…!”

She let out a shout.

“Give it back…”

Her voice fell apart. It lacked the strength and volume from before and it was filled with uncertain trembling.

“Please give it back. You don’t have to save me, so please give it back.”

I definitely don’t have to ask what “it” is, sighed Harakawa.

The answer was “everything”.

And then the dragon replied.

“I am sorry. …I do not know.”

“You don’t know what?” slowly asked Heo. She raised her head as if speaking to Harakawa. “What are you saying you don’t know, you machine that lets people be killed?”

“My role. I exist and have functions, but I need a name to recognize my existence and to give me an objective. Without that, I cannot use my functions toward that objective.”

Harakawa spoke to the voice and tapped Heo’s back to give himself time to speak.

“You didn’t have a name when you were made?”

“I have records indicating I once had one, but I cannot speak that name. That name belonged to what I once was, but I have remade my former self.”

“So all you can use are functions brought by the slight remnants of memory from when you remade yourself?”

…Is that why he says he knows but does not know?

All of his memories were classified as someone else’s. His appearance to save Heo must have been a sort of instinct that had permeated his being while being remade.

Harakawa prepared to ask if he truly intended to protect Heo, but someone else spoke before he had a chance.

It was Heo.

“Of course you have a name.”

She forcefully sat up by removing Harakawa's arms and raising her upper body.

"It's 'demon', isn't it?"

I'm glad it's so dark, thought Harakawa when he heard that. *This way I don't have to see the look on her face.*

"So my name is Demon?"

"Yes. I…I am giving you that name, so please leave and never show yourself to me again! If the demon is gone-…"

"Heo."

She stopped when he called her name. In the pale blue light on her chest, her silhouette curved up like a cat and Harakawa spoke while looking at that shadow.

"Are you listening, Heo Thunderson?"

"Y-yes…"

Her voice fell and some of its energy vanished. Relieved by that, Harakawa tried to keep as much emotion out of his voice as possible.

"Unfortunately, this is not the demon."

"B-but…!"

"The demon that killed your mother is something else. This one only showed up a little late."

He heard a gasp and felt a tremble of shock from the butt that sat on his stomach.

"Listen," he said. "Unfortunately, Heo Thunderson, his objective is to protect you. Not to protect your mother. And another thing, Heo Thunderson. Your mother tried to save you, but failed and died. That is why he appeared. The demon was attacking you, so he had to make sure it did not kill you."

“Th-then…”

“Enough of that. Think ahead before you speak, Heo. Now listen. You are blaming this dragon for you mother’s death, but what if you turn that idea around? Your mother died because she tried to protect you. If she had left it to this dragon…no, because he did not make it in time…”

He hesitated, but he said it.

“If your mother had left you to be killed by the demon, she would not have been killed.”

He continued to speak and felt he was almost telling himself this.

“Heo, what would you do even if he did give everything back? After all, once your mother died, you were the one that chose to be demon possessed. You did not try to deny it and you only chose to run away. Wouldn’t something similar have happened even if your mother was with you? While that was the beginning of your unhappiness, you are the one that chose to continue on in that unhappiness without rejecting it. Am I wrong, Heo Thunderson?”

After he said that, all motion vanished.

After a while, he heard a breath, but he was unsure if it was his own or Heo’s. That was just how focused he was on the faint silhouette in front of him.

The few seconds that passed felt much more dense and slow than usual.

“Why?”

“The answer is simple. I do not know, Heo Thunderson.”

He brought oxygen to his lungs while focusing.

“Isn’t it the same for you? You don’t know either, do you, Heo?”

“That’s not true. I finally heard the truth. I know why my mom died, I have someone to let my resentment out on, and I never want to see them again.”

“And do you think they’re completely in the wrong?”

“Of course I do.”

Harakawa said nothing. He simply sat up without making a noise and took another gentle action.

“Ah.”

He hugged Heo and his arms around her body told him a certain fact.

“Don’t lie, Heo Thunderson.”

“…”

Silence filled the cockpit until he heard sobbing from his chest.

“But…”

He heard her speak, but he silenced her by holding her even tighter.

…You vaguely realize it, don’t you?

Even if she did not know about this dragon or the demon, she knew what path she was choosing.

She had chosen to reject it, but that very action of choosing had made her worried about the one-sided protection of the organization named UCAT.

What a selfish girl, he thought. *She doesn’t realize it herself and makes everyone around her deal with it.*

Just as he realized she was like a cat, he smiled bitterly in his heart and tapped her back.

“Hey, can you tell me one thing? Why do you protect Heo? If it was your choice, then how did you meet her?” he asked. “If someone left you to her, that person is

the one behind all this. Heo, do you remember anything? Was there some kind of ritual a long time ago?"

"Eh?"

Heo moved a bit. With her face pressed to his chest, she turned to the side and looked up at him.

He saw tears reflecting the blue light. As inexpressible thoughts filled him, he heard her quiet sobbing voice.

"There was nothing like that. Nothing more than my parents giving me the name Heo. …I can't speak for when I was a baby, though."

"Heo is correct," said the dragon. "I have no memory of such a ritual. But…that is why I will open my memories. The memories of a me I do not know. I will show you those memories using the circuit allowing you to hear this voice."

The dragon said one last thing.

"To use a word I know, this is a memory of a 'promise'."

Shinjou thought the pasts Baku showed her were a lot like dreams.

She felt like she had dozed off, but her eyes soon focused, she sensed light, and color filled her world.

Blue slowly filled her vision.

It was the sky.

It was a vast blue expanse filled with clouds, but there was one odd thing about it.

"There's no land."

She looked around in all 360 degrees, but everything was blue as far as the eye could see. The only land she saw was…

…Floating islands?

Some objects floated here and there in the sky.

They literally were floating islands. Broken pieces of crust drifted through the sky like the wreckage of a larger piece of land.

Most of them were clumps of rock and it was difficult to tell their size with nothing else in the sky to compare them to.

She moved her vision closer and found one was a narrow slab of dark stone that measured a kilometer long. Clumps of plants with triangular leaves were attached to the top of the slab.

…This is 5th-Gear, isn't it?

Shinjou suddenly found a manmade object.

…A building?

Gray and green land floated in the sky about a hundred meters below her.

It was around a hundred meters across, the gray was artificial pavement, and a similarly colored square building was located on top of it. The area behind the building was filled with bluish-green plants with long, narrow leaves.

Among them, she saw a certain shape and colors.

The shape was a dragon and the colors were blue and white.

"Xolotl 3."

She saw someone pushing through the dense foliage in front of the mechanical dragon.

The person wore something like a scuba tank on his back and a half-face helmet on his head.

“That’s Thunderson-san, isn’t it?”

His breath was visibly white around him and the speed at which the breaths scattered suggested a strong wind. However, the scattering breaths spun around as if hitting a wall a meter away from him.

Gravitational control or something similar must have been protecting him from the air pressure and wind.

After some hesitation, Shinjou waited until the proper timing and had her vision jump down.

Her mind fell for only an instant and she landed on the lower surface with no sound or sensation of impact.

It was a gray and smooth paved road. It had a curb and the edges had a slightly raised area much like a sidewalk.

This must have been a world that thought about people’s safety, she thought.

She moved her vision forward and found what looked like a house.

It was a short, square building. It was about twenty meters across on each side, three meters tall, and windowless. However, it had round fist-sized lenses on a few spots on the walls.

The entrance was located a level lower. There was a slope at the front of the building that led to a rectangular seam on the wall at what was likely the basement.

…It’s like a shelter.

After that thought, she heard someone breathing. Someone was catching their breath to her right and on the other side of the building.

It was Thunderson, the man wearing the tank.

“Xolotl 3, I’ve made it to the front.”

Xolotl 3’s voice came from near the man’s shoulder.

“I am sorry, Thunderson. If I went, I would likely destroy it.”

“It’s fine. This is part of the investigation process. …And you’re curious about this building, right?”

“Yes, in your manner of speaking, I am ‘curious’. In my manner of speaking, I feel it is worth investigating. There might be a weapon or something else there which is sending out a faint signal. Ever since I was born in these skies, I have been ‘curious’ about it, but I am too large to enter.”

“That’s a dangerous kind of curiosity. But Xolotl 3, are you sure I should be going in here?”

“You have my spare sensory device attached to your shoulder, so I will see whatever you see and hear whatever you hear. …So please enter. I am curious. I was born as a machine, so why am I curious about the ground and why have I always come to rest here between battles for thousands of years?”

“I see,” said Thunderson before hesitating.

But he soon grabbed the meter hanging from the tank on his back.

“I’m going in. But our translation concept is weak, so tell me if anything is labelled as dangerous.”

His look of resolve was turned straight forward and he made his way down the slope to the basement entrance.

His footing was confident and the sound of his military boots soon arrived at the entrance.

The door was two meters tall and three meters wide.

“I see our standards are the same. I’m opening it.”

The door opened by dropping down.

Huh? thought Shinjou as he looked at the upper edge of the door. A space opened along the width of the fallen door, but the bottom of new type of door panel soon replaced it from the other side. She could tell the metal was somewhat flexible, but she did not know how it worked.

Wind blew in front of her. The difference in air pressure at such a high altitude caused the air inside to burst out.

Most of it was dust. Dirty brown smoke mixed in with the wind and danced about and a torn paper-like fiber followed.

“That isn’t good. This could destroy the whole thing.”

Thunderson rushed into the door and Shinjou did so as well.

She heard the door close behind her as she followed the man inside the building.

The entranceway was a three square meter space.

The walls themselves emitted pale beige light. The hallway floor was black, but the spots the man stepped on glowed bluish-white and that glow spread in ripples shaped like his footprints.

The hallway continued both right and left, but Thunderson checked right first.

“Can you see this, Xolotl 3? The right side has been destroyed.”

The right half of the hallway had melted. No, it had technically not melted.

“It looks like the metal lost control. It must have broken at an early stage of the destruction and just melted into a clump.”

The metal forming the hallway’s walls was crushed as if someone had slammed a bar into it from the left wall.

The gaps in the collapsed walls gave a glimpse of the piles of objects from the rooms bordering the hallway. Some of the objects appeared to be made of wood, but whatever had covered their surface had crumbled like sand.

It had all been worn away by the passage of time.

“There is nothing to see there. Go left, Thunderson.”

“Sure,” replied the man.

The left end of the hallway had also collapsed, but he headed for the one intact door.

Shinjou realized something from the softness of the lighting coming from the walls.

…This was a home. There weren’t any weapons here.

She then noticed Thunderson had vanished.

The door down the hallway was open, so he had entered that final room and left her alone.

She was belatedly hesitant to enter someone’s private room. She was unsure it was appropriate for someone who had only ever lived at UCAT and a student dorm.

But that thought was blown away by the beige light shining from beyond the door.

She relied on the illusion that the light was warming her nonexistent body and she set foot in the room.

“Ah…”

The room was almost ten square meters. Thunderson stood in the center and the gray dust on the floor was up to his ankles. The room was unfurnished, but the dusty walls had lines on it as if objects could be pulled out from them.

The room looked empty, but it did contain something.

The gray dust on the floor revealed a shape there.

…A cushion?

There was a shallow rectangular bulge on the floor. It rose further on one end as if to lay one's head on and there were dividing lines on the wall at the end. The lines were in the perfect place to look at while lying on the floor.

…Was something like a TV kept in the wall there?

Shinjou thought about whoever had lived here.

A book or a device with similar functionality had likely been within arm's reach. This was near the kitchen, so they would have been able to keep snacks and drinks around.

She saw a few other bulges in the dust covering the room.

Thousands of years had passed in 5th-Gear since Black Sun had destroyed the land and the people had been destroyed. This house seemed to have retained some atmosphere, but the resident or residents would have been long dead.

However, Shinjou suddenly remembered what Sayama had said just before she had been shown the past.

…There are still questions about the fall of the 5th-Gear's people?

She wondered what those could be, but the scene around her gave no answers.

The dust looked like gray snow and it only revealed the past through the weathered wreckage hidden below.

She then saw Thunderson pick something up from the dust.

It looked like a B5-size glass panel.

But it was actually a piece of paper encased in a clear sheet that resembled glass.

The paper contained color. The colors were those of reality. Or rather, the colors of a photograph depicting reality.

"…"

The photograph showed a girl, a man, and a woman.

They looked human. Their skin was very nearly white and their slenderness seemed to be their primary characteristic. Overall, they resembled the long-lived race.

Shinjou thought the girl standing in front looked fourteen or fifteen. The identical blonde hair on all three suggested the girl was the daughter of the man and woman behind her. Blue eyes with a hint of green smiled in the center of the photograph.

Thunderson moved his fingers to brush the dust from the photograph.

"Xolotl 3. Do you know who these people are?"

"No, I do not."

"Then do you know why you are so curious about this place?"

"No, I do not. But," said Xolotl 3. "To use your manner of speaking, this is a 'calming' place."

That comment was followed by a sudden noise.

It came from the wall. The dividing lines Shinjou had seen before extended outward and lit up.

It became a screen.

…Is this…?

The screen displayed the same man standing in the photograph. What looked like a factory was visible behind him. It was a large factory that seemed to extend forever and countless machines were moving about. Mechanical arms were carrying drive wheels and metal frames that looked like pieces of a giant skeleton. Other machines were welding them together.

With that in the background, the man used his blue clothes to wipe a black liquid from his hands.

“Sorry that————the periodic letter. It’s just been————————.”

The sound and video would skip. Instead of filling with static, the video partially blacked out and then the scene changed. It was still in the same factory, but the background was different. A transportation pallet was now visible and Shinjou recognized what it carried.

…Xolotl 3?

“This is the experimental————————the separation isn’t going well. In addition to the pilot, someone else must combine with it, but their body and memories————————and can’t be recovered. The other units are similarly——————————, but once this is complete, ————————help Black Sun that you love so much. Once he and White Creation are protecting our world together, we can rest————————”

The video skipped again, but the location did not change. The man and his fellow workers stood in front of a mechanical dragon that looked a lot like Xolotl 3, but was not quite the same. All of them looked exhausted, none of them had shaved recently, and their clothes were filthy, but they were all smiling. Some were even waving at the camera.

But the image suddenly changed and Shinjou’s confused mind was shown something else.

The factory was being destroyed. As the ceiling collapsed and sparks flew everywhere, the same glasses-wearing man stared into the screen with a tense look on his face.

“Can you————? We were hit by a chemical————————. It was a concept bomb————————by 9th. ————headed to your planet too.”

Before Shinjou could wonder what was going on, an alarm sounded in the footage and the man closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry. Black Sun is undergoing maintenance, but————————asked him to take care of everything. If all of you are suffering, and it doesn’t look like we’re going to make it in time————————the planet. ————sure it will trouble Black Sun, so————”

The man opened his eyes and looked directly into the screen.

“Do what you can until the last moment. ————and tell Black Sun to find happiness.”

That was all. The video ended and the screen went dark.

And as black filled the screen, Shinjou took a dazed breath.

That had given the truth behind Black Sun’s destruction of 5th-Gear.

…Does that mean…!?

“Could Black Sun not stand seeing the people suffer and die from another Gear’s chemical weapon, so he went out of control and destroyed them himself!? All to keep them from suffering!? And did he come up with his own reason for doing it because he didn’t want responsibility to lie with the people who asked him to do it!?”

But…

“Did a few people combine with the incomplete mechanical dragons to survive the chemical weapon?”

When they did, they lost their memories and began to battle the rampaging Black Sun.

And it was all because they had cared for each other and yet lost everything.

Shinjou then saw Thunderson look away from the black screen and open his mouth.

“Hey.”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember when you were born?”

“No,” replied Xolotl 3. “But I do remember it was very ‘sad’. I opened my communications and heard what my fellow mechanical dragons had to say and they were the same. It was a reaction to losing some kind of support and losing any objective.”

“Then, Xolotl 3… Who are you?”

“I am Xolotl 3.”

“Then tell me this, Xolotl 3. How is this read?”

He looked down at the photograph in the glass panel he held.

Something was written on it. Shinjou could read the meaning of the characters written in something like bluish-black pen, but she did not know what sound the writing represented.

But she heard Xolotl 3’s answer.

“It is a name. The first word means “to” and the following word is the name of the girl in the photograph.”

“And that name is?”

“In the sounds of your world it would be ‘Heo’,” explained Xolotl 3. “It means ‘happiness’.”

As Shinjou's nonexistent body stiffened, Xolotl 3's voice continued.

"Why are you crying, Thunderson of the family of thunder."

"Because I understand now," he said. "You are human, Xolotl 3. Even if you do not understand, this girl and I do. This girl who was meant to have happiness understands and so do I. And about Black Sun…was he your friend?"

"Then…let us decide."

Thunderson frowned.

"Decide what?"

"We will continue on and settle things with Black Sun. He will likely flee to your world as usual, but repeating that process will only wear us down."

So…

"We will pursue Black Sun and then our entire army, White Creation included, will settle this in your world."

Thunderson's shoulders shook and he spoke to the camera-shaped sensory device on his right shoulder.

"With the Concept Core gone, 5th-Gear will be destroyed while you do that!"

He placed the photograph on the floor, gave a quick nod toward the three people in the photograph, and left the room. And he did so at a run.

He reached the entranceway, opened the door, and left the house.

The blue sky was now visible beyond the slope up from the basement.

A swarm of dragons had appeared. Shinjou saw mechanical dragons filling that blue sky. A white one measuring over three hundred meters long was in the center with hundreds of miscellaneously colored dragons flying around it.

Wind blew with a refreshing sound.

She then heard a voice from the giant six-winged white dragon overhead.

“One with the name of the family of thunder, will you fight with us?”

“Why… Why are you asking me that?”

“We are made to fear and prevent the destruction of 5th-Gear, so we cannot pursue Black Sun when he leaves 5th-Gear. That is why we wish for orders. As machines, we wish for a human to control us.”

The white dragon was likely White Creation. He slowly lowered his head and the dragons floating around him did the same.

“I am a machine, but you referred to my fellow dragons as human. You called them humans who have chosen to forget that they are human. …And you are a human that has not forgotten that he is a human.”

“…”

“I want to give you full authority over 5th-Gear and I want your help in defeating Black Sun.”

“Why?”

“I believe I have already stated why I chose you.”

“No,” said Thunderson before his visibly white breathing stopped.

After a moment, he took a step up the slope to widen his vision.

“Why are you fighting? This will destroy your Gear.”

“I was given a single command from my original creator,” said White Creation while the dragons lowered their heads as if nodding. “I am to guide the people to happiness. What we cannot stand more than losing our own peace is to see people’s happiness destroyed, no matter where those people might be. That is

why we will destroy Black Sun. We will destroy our foolish and yet kind brother who destroyed our people and our world because he could not stand seeing them suffer."

"That's quite a pushy sort of happiness," said Thunderson while slowly looking across the heavens and the earth that floated in the sky. "And you're asking me to become a villain for that? I have to be the villain who ordered the destruction of this world?"

He took a breath, closed his eyes, and gave one last resigned comment.

"So the time for my resolve has come."

After hearing that, Shinjou felt a sudden floating sensation.

She was waking from the past and slowly returning to the present and to reality.

Heo was curled up in the arms that supported her in the darkness.

Her senses shifted from the past she had seen like a dream and back to reality.

She felt the pulse, breathing, and heat of Harakawa who she was pressed up against.

"Is that what my name means?"

"I do not know," replied the dragon. "But my previous self fought along with the one he chose as his pilot and scored a fatal wound on the enemy, but I too was destroyed and unable to fully defeat that enemy. The enemy fled to the ocean to prepare for a future rematch and it seems we wished to combine with a single weapon along with White Creation. That being the Vesper Cannon that I once possessed."

Showing those memories may have established some connections within him because he continued to speak.

“And at that time, White Creation chose me as the bearer of the weapon they became. I was to completely remake my destroyed body and rest until I was needed.”

Hearing that, Heo opened her mouth and wondered how loud her voice would sound in this dark stillness.

“And why did you help me?”

“I believe it was a promise. When falling into my personal concept space, my former self made a promise with my pilot. If a child needing protection was born to the family of thunder, that child was to be given full authority over 5th-Gear and the name of happiness.”

She listened to the voice.

“As the protector of 5th-Gear’s happiness, I promised to protect that child as thanks to the one who cried for our people.”

She was left speechless, but strength gathered in Harakawa’s arms around her shoulders and back and she sank into that strength.

…How can I find a way to reject this thing that caused what I called a demon?

But…

“I was given my name by my parents.”

She did not know why, but her parents had hoped she would be happy and that she would be protected.

…Why did they make sure only I was protected when they were the ones that fought?

And it was hard to believe that Black Sun, that demon, had cared about people.

There was so much she wanted to say that she had difficulty sorting through it all.

And just as she tried to figure out what to do, she heard a new sound. An electronic tone rang loudly in the silent and dark space.

“A cellphone. That’s the one the treasurer gave me, isn’t it?”

Harakawa spoke, removed a hand from her back, and stuck it in his own pocket. From the movement of the air, she could tell he had placed a cellphone against his ear.

“Treasurer?”

“It is I. It seems Kanda has finally opened the communications line, so feel free to send your praise…to me.”

After a quiet electronic tone, the sound vanished. Harakawa had hung up and put the phone in his pocket.

“Looks like the bad dream isn’t over yet. I’m going back to sleep for a bit.”

“U-um, Harakawa. Was that the voice of that crazy person who came by yesterday?

As she asked that, the phone began to ring again and Harakawa gave an annoyed sigh.

“What is it, idiot?”

“Heh heh heh. Did you hear that, Shinjou-kun? Harakawa does not know his place.”

“Stop making things more confusing than they have to be, Sayama you idiot! Now what do you want?”

Heo strained her ears in the darkness and listened to the voice coming from the cellphone.

“Sorry, Harakawa, but I do not actually need you for anything. See, that is what you get. …However, I would like to speak with Heo Thunderson-kun who is with you.”

Heo looked up and felt like Harakawa was looking at her, so she tilted her head in confusion.

“Listen, Sayama,” said Harakawa from beyond the phone. “Heo said she has nothing to say to you and that you need to just go die.”

“I-I did not say that!”

“Oh, I am glad to see you are doing well. …Now listen, Heo Thunderson-kun.”

Heo listened to the boy named Sayama.

“We belong to the Japanese UCAT that functions separately from the American UCAT that is protecting you. And currently, I have demonstrated my greatness by gaining America’s approval to rescind that protection as compensation for my victory.”

She did not know what he meant by rescinding her protection.

“Eh?”

She gave voice to her confusion, but that did not stop the boy.

“Listen,” he began. “That means you will no longer be protected by America or anyone else if you do not wish for it. So live as you wish here in Japan, using the money and connections you possess. If you wish to return, either pay for the plane ticket yourself or flee to the embassy. Understand?”

“W-wait a minute.”

“Waiting will change nothing, but if you have something to say, I will listen. …What is it?”

Heo thought.

She tried to approach the phone to better make herself heard, but her forehead hit something hard. Harakawa had been thinking the same thing and held the phone out toward her.

“Ow, ow,” she said while holding her head, but she took the phone and gathered her thoughts. “U-um, well…”

She thought and pressed the cellphone against her ear.

“So my words will actually get through to you?”

“If they would not get through to me, they would not get through to anyone else in the world.”

“I detect a structural flaw in that logic,” commented the dragon.

Heo felt the dragon was exactly right, but she spoke regardless.

“Then why?”

“Let me ask you this instead. Why do you ask that?”

“Well…” she began.

“We are about to go fight what is likely the enemy that has pursued your past. …But it has nothing to do with you.”

“Wh-what? How can you say that?”

“Then why did you accept their protection that would take to a place wholly unrelated to this fight?”

He did not stop there.

“This is a negotiation. To be honest, I would like your help. If you have already had the basics explained to you, you understand what I mean by that, right?”

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“Yes,” she answered with a nod.

She understood from the dream the man named Roger had given her. The world would be destroyed soon and her great-grandfather had been left with full authority of the world known as 5th-Gear.

But it seemed there was more to the story of that authority.

“You have inherited 5th-Gear’s authority from your great-grandfather. That includes the right to owning the Concept Core. As proof of that, your name is a 5th-Gear word, your dragon is a 5th-Gear human, that dragon is there for you, and the weapon made for that dragon contains the Concept Core. In other words, your great-grandfather and parents have given you the ability needed to act as 5th-Gear’s representative.”

“Th-then you’re telling me to use that power to help you?”

“I never said that,” replied Sayama. “To be completely honest, your help would be appreciated. After all, the destruction of the world would rob me of a land to rule over and that would be quite a problem for Shinjou-kun.”

“Th-that would not be a problem for me at all.”

“Ha ha ha. No need to be shy, Shinjou-kun. …Anyway, are you listening, Heo-kun? There is a lot going on and I would like your help, but everyone around me has chosen to gather here of their own free will. I could use a variety of threats or enticements to call you to me, but that is not our way of doing things.”

“B-but if the world would be destroyed without my help…”

“Then let it be destroyed. A world that cannot move a single girl’s heart deserves nothing less.”

And…

“But we will do whatever we can to fight it and we are more than willing to do so. We have a lot of spare time on our hands and we will not give up no matter what. That is all.”

“Then…”

“That is what we offer in this negotiation. We will not protect you and we will not let any other organization protect you. We will not provide you with order or peace of mind. We stand in a place where we look at the unadorned facts that the world is headed for destruction and Black Sun, who went mad for the sake of the people, flies through our skies.”

He took a breath.

“You have power, but power is nothing if it is never used. I would like your help, but there is no point if you yourself will not use your power. So if you ever want to break through the goal tape yourself, just say so. That delinquent boy will show you the way. But do not cheerfully trust us, Heo Thunderson. We may be comrades with the same goal, but we are not some clichéd group of friends. We are simply a group of people facing in the same direction. If you are fine with that, then come visit us.”

That was all.

With an electronic tone, the call ended. The complete lack of parting words left Heo speechless.

Sayama looked around his surroundings with the lights washing over him.

The blue armored uniforms and the blue mechanical dragons stood on the broad runway and the white uniforms stood by the white building.

They were all staring intently at him, so Sayama first raised his left arm forcefully enough to produce a sound from the fabric of his suit’s elbow.

“What are you doing!? Black Sun’s army is on its way! As that phone call proved, Kanda has given us free use of our communication devices! Report!!”

“Testament,” said a female voice from the white building.

Sibyl had stepped out of the entrance with a bandage around her right arm.

“Six minutes ago, the American UCAT forces remaining in Chofu engaged Black Sun’s advance unit. Communications suddenly cut out two minutes ago. Currently, a group led by American UCAT’s inspector has left Yokota to intercept them near Kunitachi.”

“If that interception fails, when will Black Sun’s advance unit arrive here?”

“Most likely, around 22:00. That is approximately twenty-five minutes from now.”

That immediate declaration produced noise from everyone there. But instead of gasping, it was the noise of weapons being prepared.

Sayama was satisfied by those overlapping sounds of steel and the fact that those in blue were also preparing. He then looked across the table and at Roger who was fixing his suit collar.

“I am impressed by American UCAT’s response to an estimation based on the assumption that your inspector will be defeated. I would like to continue this as equals.”

“Testament,” replied Roger while narrowing his eyes and turning toward his fellow American UCAT members.

But he stopped and instead reached a hand toward the table and to the philosopher’s stone on Baku’s neck.

“This is a defense concept. …You really got me there.”

“You yourself did quite well to read the letter at the end.”

“Testament. When did you realize the truth?”

Sayama replied without hesitating to lose himself in the curious look in Shinjou’s eyes.

“That is a simple matter. When you read the document during our chat last night, I wondered why he never once mentioned his precious great-granddaughter. And today when I heard Heo Thunderson had been saved by something invisible, I made a guess that she had inherited something,” he explained. “I decided Richard Thunderson must have already known his great-granddaughter would be fine on her own. …And that knowledge had most likely come when she had lost her mother.”

Sayama pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. It was the article about the death of Heo’s mother that he had received via Moira 1st.

“When asked why her mother had such a peaceful expression in death, some speculated a family member had been the culprit. However, that expression was proof that the Thunderson family had chosen the proper happiness.”

He felt a sudden pain in the left side of his chest.

He knew why. His own mother had attempted a double suicide with him.

…What expression did she have?

As he thought that and held his right hand to his chest, something supported that arm.

The slender arm and slight strength were Shinjou’s, so he nodded toward her and relaxed.

“5th’s destruction and Black Sun were a simple matter as well. …A truly excellent machine will obey its people.”

He looked forward once more and saw Roger pushing his glasses up his nose.

“I see. It would seem I had grown a little too close-minded.”

This time, he really did turn around to prepare for the interception of Black Sun.

However, Sayama saw a new document that had appeared on the table.

“What is this?”

“Something I was asked to hold on to and bring here. Asked by your grandfather.”

Sayama frowned and felt his pulse quicken as he looked at the first page of the document. He read the title aloud.

“Georgius Development Plan.”

And the author.

“Sayama Asagi!?”

The pain arrived. His body cramped around the left of his chest and felt like it was breaking.

“Sayama-kun!”

Once he heard Shinjou’s cry, he gathered strength in his back and stood back up. He bore with the instant of pain threatening to bind his body.

“So you did hold an important position during UCAT’s blank period!”

“No, I was nothing more than a soldier. Among them, anyway. And once it was all over, I was given this as someone who was close to him. This is the development plan for the left and right Georgius, which are needed to end the Leviathan Road.”

“Left and right?”

“Yes. We were unable to use them. Most likely, the only ones who can are those with the surname Sayama and those with the surname Shinjou.”

Not only did Sayama stiffen upon hearing that, but Shinjou did as well.

She took a step forward and asked a question.

“But… Why my surname too!?”

“That is as much as I can tell you. I do not have the authority for anything more.” He waved his hand with his back still turned. “It may be that this negotiation had already been decided long ago. Your grandfather said the Leviathan Road cannot be ended without Georgius. If that is true, only Japanese UCAT can stop the destruction of the world.”

Roger began to walk and his footsteps on the asphalt grew more distant. As if pursuing that sound, Sibyl looked up with a cellphone to her ear.

“Everyone!”

She was frowning and her voice rang loudly.

“We have lost contact with the interception unit in Kunitachi.”

Harakawa heard a pulse and breathing in the darkness.

The quiet sounds came from the girl curled up on top of his chest.

She was not moving and the dragon carrying them said nothing.

How much time had passed?

He did not bother counting the breaths that functioned as an hourglass, but finally he heard a quiet voice.

“That’s horrible.”

It was Heo and she seemed to be testing the volume of her voice.

“How can he tell me to do whatever I want when the world will be destroyed without my help?”

Harakawa was not sure if he should say anything, but he decided to correct her.

“That idiot really means it. He and everyone around him are crazy. They all think they can do something, but if they can’t, they think that’s fine too. So even if you don’t help them, they’ll stupidly and optimistically assume they can get by somehow or other on their own.”

“Really?”

“That idiot said he *wanted* your help, right? If he really *needed* it, he would have said so. They can say that kind of thing because they all have the power to do something.”

“But Harakawa, you aren’t telling me to help you or that you need me.”

“Why would I? I’m not trying to do anything as crazy as them.”

“But…you still came for me.”

“…”

After he fell silent, a familiar question reached his ears.

“Why?”

She asked it again.

“Why did my parents, my great-grandfather, those strange people, and you do what you did?”

“How should I know? I might have a guess, but how should I know?” he said. “And let me tell you something, Heo Thunderson. There are definitely things it isn’t nice not knowing, but there are also things you can be perfectly happy not knowing.”

He recalled that the protective charm from his mother had taken the attack by the dragon's claws for them. And he recalled when he had taken a certain girl into his room.

"There are things like that, aren't there?"

The girl in his arms did not move and she held her breath for a moment.

However, he noticed her pulse had risen a little.

"There is happiness inside you that you don't understand, but will you refuse to trust it just because you don't understand it?"

"Well…"

"Answer me, Heo. Heo Thunderson. You said you do not know why everyone made the decisions they did, but there are things you can trust even if you don't understand them. Whether you understand it or not, the fact remains that many people have protected you all this time. …And the same goes for you."

He took a breath while noticing how everything he had to tell this girl needed to be said to him as well.

"Do not lie about the happiness inside you, Heo Thunderson."

"Why?" She looked up. "Why do you do have to say that?'

"Because that is my happiness."

He knew she would probably protest. She would probably ask him what exactly he meant which was not a question he wanted to answer.

And so he sealed those words inside her. And he used his own lips to do so.

"…"

Her body stiffened a bit.

"…"

But after a few seconds, the two parted and let out a breath. A moment later, Heo spoke.

"U-um, uh. Th-that was my first time…just now."

"Calm down. I'm sure one of your parents beat me to it."

"D-don't ruin a girl's dream like that…"

Her words fell apart toward the end, but in place of the tears and shaking from before, she gave a bitter laugh.

Her shoulders shook and she gave a ticklish laugh.

"That's right," she said while slowly sitting up.

"What is?"

"Trusting. It isn't easy, but there is some truth there." She gave another small laugh. "Like the fact that you pursued me and kissed me even after I pushed you away like that."

"Wait."

He had an oddly bad feeling, so he reached out and grabbed her again.

He then realized her body was trembling again even as she tried to sound confident.

…So she was just faking it.

He heard her voice again.

"Please support me if anything happens."

"If I feel like it."

“Sure,” she said with a laugh. “Um, dragon?”

“What?” replied the voice.

She took in a large breath, exhaled, and spoke.

“I think I will pursue Black Sun.”

“But I…”

“You don’t know your name, right? And you need a name for your functionality. To be honest, I still don’t understand you very well and I don’t really think we can become friends,” she said. “But we have the same objective, don’t we? So…”

She said it.

“Thunder Fellow. You are a companion of the family of thunder, so how about that for a name?”

The voice said nothing in response.

Instead, a light appeared.

“Ah.”

The cockpit’s ceiling, sides, and front lit up.

A table stuck out below the pointed windshield in the front and a console window covered the table. Similar consoles appeared on the sides.

The cockpit had no control column or steering wheel, but a pair of roll bars could be seen on either side as if to support someone leaning in the seat.

As the light from the cockpit left through the windshield, color could be seen appearing on the dragon’s body. Or rather, the armor had stopped hiding its form.

The dragon half buried in sludge had a pointed form with blue and white armor.

Harakawa looked around and saw a second seat further back that looked like a bed.

“Lie there, child of happiness. When you are taken in and combine with me, the output limiters will be put in your control.”

“Wait, wait. Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if she loses her memory or there’s some other side effe-…”

“That was already fixed based on my previous self’s experiences. …I will protect her. I promise.”

Harakawa saw Heo nod in his arms.

“Let’s go so we can stop that lonely dragon named Black Sun.”

Her eyes were red from crying, but her expression showed she had accepted her power.

And so he sighed, lowered his shoulders, and let go.

“You really have gotten motivated. Just do whatever it is you want.”

“There is something for you to do as well, Harakawa,” said the dragon.

“What?”

Harakawa frowned and Thunder Fellow continued.

“After seeing you protect her twice before I could, I took the liberty of linking your nervous system to my control system when taking you onboard earlier.”

“Wait, wait, wait a second. What do you mean linked?”

He then realized something about when the giant black dragon’s main weapon had hit them.

…Everything seemed to happen really slowly.

“I will concentrate the neurotransmission of my own body, you will pilot my body, and Heo will both support you and use her mind to release the limiters of my body. When I evolved, I gained a number of functions I have yet to use, but…”

This powerful voice was the dragon’s true will.

“If we do this, we can draw out my full power.”

At 9:37 PM, Black Sun and its army clashed with the American UCAT mechanical dragons deployed at Kunitachi.

They had smashed most of those to pieces and continued westward after shaking free of the few remaining ones.

Yokota Air Base was west of western Tachikawa and the Showa Memorial Park, but it had no equipment left and all of its remaining forces had evacuated underground.

Black Sun sent some leading child craft along the surface to destroy anything that could attack, but they were all sent on even further ahead by the time Black Sun himself reached the base.

There were no more enemies left.

All that remained was the familiar scent that was growing stronger. It was a powerful concept reading to the west and it smelled of the weapon that had once defeated him.

Black Sun pointed that direction and slowly accelerated.

However, he detected a new scent.

In the sky even further east of the defeated enemies was some other familiar scent.

“…”

Black Sun had eliminated his negligence, so he sent some child craft into the sky behind him. He sent enough to defeat all of the enemy forces that had appeared thus far.

And at the same time, an automaton in control of the concept space creation device terminal near Tokyo Bay saw something strange.

Something slowly rose from Tokyo Bay which was supposedly empty.

It resembled a sword.

It was a thirty meter metal structure colored blue and white.

The automaton’s sight saw the water gently split above its tip as it hovered into the air.

It was a mechanical dragon.

The automaton determined this was an unidentified mechanical dragon that was different from the black ones. It was approximately five kilometers away and her scan via ultra-long distance vision showed its form was similar to the high-speed cruising form of the full transformation models. However…

“Its frame is not made to transform?”

That meant it was a non-transformation model.

“I have determined it is limited to high-speed mobility.”

A red light ran between the blue and white armor like a pulse.

That acted as a signal.

The dragon bent its body and rolled around as if dancing in the air above the water.

“!”

It suddenly shot up into the sky.

It happened instantly. All it left behind was wind, a spray of water, and a white line of water vapor that revealed its path.

The automaton’s gaze followed the white line that cut westward through the night sky.

She moved her sight devices, turned her head, and spun her body around to follow it.

“…!?”

But she was not quick enough. All she saw was the white line.

By the time she completely turned around, that line had already vanished into the western sky.

That left only the sound.

The windy roar of supersonic speed shook her body as it arrived from behind and passed by overhead.

She had no idea what had just happened, but one thing was clear.

“It is in pursuit. The blue and white mechanical dragon is pursuing Black Sun. And…”

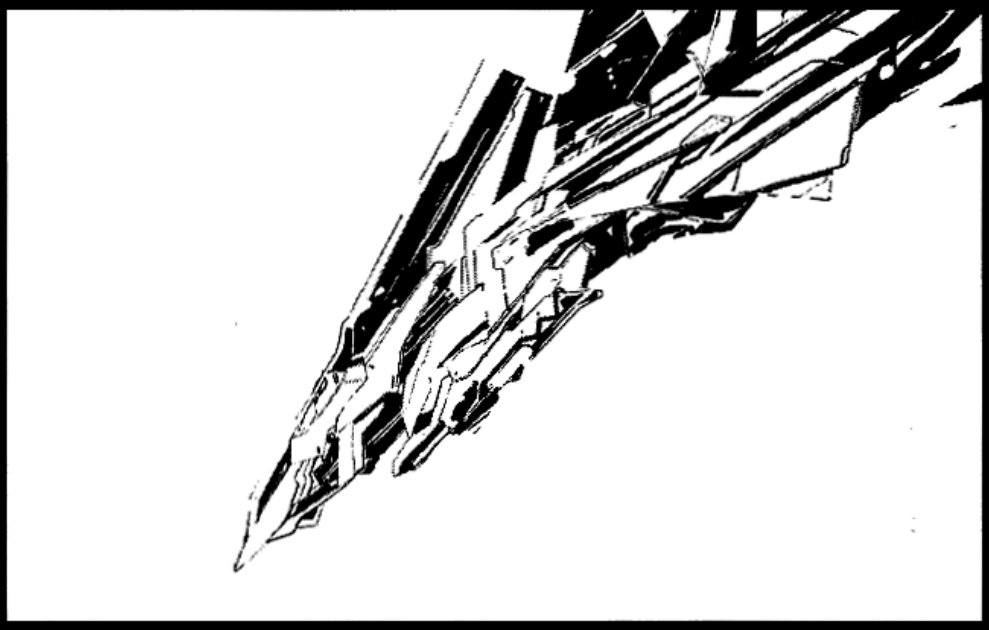
She spoke the estimation based on her probabilistic decisions.

“It will most likely catch up.”

Chapter 32: The Sky’s Guidance

Chapter 32

“The Sky’s Guidance”



Fly
Fly through the sky where no one can find fault in you

Fly

Fly through the sky where no one can find fault in you

The nighttime battle began with stillness.

A single white line flew west through the geographic center of Tokyo from Chofu to the Kunitachi and Tachikawa region.

At an altitude of approximately one kilometer, the individual specks of light down below were just barely distinguishable and a blade tore through the black sky as a white line.

That blade was a blue and white mechanical dragon.

The wall of the atmosphere shook it, but it occasionally made a quick hop off an air current as it tore westward through the air.

Ahead was nothing but the night air soon to be parted by its pointed nose and the sound of the subsequent wind was all thrown back behind it.

The color black could be seen on the empty expressway cutting east to west down below.

The color came from the scorch mark of a giant explosion.

The blue and white dragon noticed the remains of something large covering the expressway and littered across the surrounding field as well.

It shook its body just once, as if bowing toward the other smaller scorch marks.

“…”

And it flew on.

The path from Chofu to Kunitachi curved a bit to the right and thus to the north.

The concept space corridor must have been visible to the dragon because it changed course as if jumping to the side.

Some clouds floated up ahead on its new northwestern path. They were located low and had been created when the early autumn wind combined with the night air. The city's heat and the night wind had produced the clouds.

The clouds glowed a pale blue in the starlight and the blue and white dragon flew above the expanse of clouds that looked a lot like an island in the ocean.

As it flew above, the clouds split and were blasted away behind the shimmering heat of the accelerators.

The spray of scattering clouds vanished in the wind and the dragon tilted a little to the right. It did not change direction; it simply tilted.

A blade extended from its right wing and this blade was formed from white light. The dragon had raised the convergence rate of the optical weapon on its forearm to form this blade which was as long as the dragon itself. This was the dragon's light claw.

The tip of the blade sliced through the clouds. The dragon's light claw tore into the clouds like a hand reaching into the water in a moving boat.

However, the mechanical dragon soon closed that right claw. It allowed the light to rotate through the air just once before tilting to the left and similarly slicing the cloud with its left blade.

It was testing its weapons.

The left blade easily split the clouds before being stowed away.

The blue and white dragon raised its nose enough to increase its altitude and to look up into the night sky.

There, it saw the stars.

It was a moonless night. Even with the city lights down below, the stars of the heavens were bright this far up in the sky.

However, a change came over the clouds lit by that starlight: a wave ran through them.

A spray of clouds shot up approximately three hundred meters to the right.

As that spray of clouds shot high in the sky, it moved up alongside the dragon. But instead of settling down, the spray of clouds slowly rose higher.

In an instant, something shot up above the clouds as if it had jumped.

It was a black mechanical dragon. It was three hundred meters long, so it was a midsized one.

The midsized dragon flew in an arc.

“…!”

And with a cry, it dove back down into the sea of clouds.

“!”

The spray of clouds moved directly in front of the blue and white dragon.

Light gathered all across the midsized dragon’s location and that light was dark even to eyes adjusted to the darkness.

It had already prepared to fire every single one of its secondary cannons.

The midsized black dragon did so and black lines flew toward the blue and white dragon.

“Harakawa!”

Harakawa heard Heo’s voice fill the entire cockpit.

She had joined with Thunder Fellow to control the machine's output and he was in charge of the controls.

The mechanical dragon was simple to pilot. Once he sat in the seat, some kind of power held him in place without a seatbelt. Then he only had to grab the roll bars sticking out on the right and left.

…And tilt my body along with the seat.

The mechanical dragon moved using the balance of its entire body. When driving a motorcycle, one tilted the vehicle to the left or right on corners and leaned forward when accelerating. This was similar.

They were in the sky, so he could move in three dimensions, but he had picked up the horizontal alignment by flying just above the clouds earlier.

For more detailed actions like drawing those swords of light, he simply had to think it and Thunder Fellow would read his intentions and accurately reproduce the action.

All he needed now was experience.

A barrage of black light flew in front of them while they were five hundred meters from the midsized mechanical dragon.

Given their relative speeds, this was a close-range shot that was guaranteed to hit.

However, he saw the light with his eyes which were linked to Thunder Fellow's mechanical sight and he even received its predicted movement patterns.

There were sixty-four bullets of light coming from both the left and right and thirty-two coming from both the top and bottom. The number coming from the left and right was higher, but forty-eight of those on the left and right and sixteen of those on the top and bottom were from 8-way scattershot cannons.

Harakawa was not afraid of that scattershot. For fear of destroying itself, the midsized dragon did not shoot any directly behind itself.

The scattershot bullets fired on the left and right spread out vertically like a fan and those fired on the top and bottom spread out horizontally. That formed a wall of bullets on all four sides to limit Harakawa's actions.

"But the area behind you is still wide open."

The bullets that flew through the corridor created by the four scattershot walls were straight shots from small cannons.

Those small cannons were installed all over the midsized dragon, so the dragon's smaller movements caused them to vibrate. When moving about quickly, those cannons could fire plenty of bullets but could not aim properly.

Harakawa slipped through the black lines of the flying bullets and continued forward.

He avoided a few of those extreme close-range shots by letting them slip below the wings and a few more by raising the dragon's body above them.

But when he raised the dragon and exposed its belly, a single shot was fired from almost straight ahead and toward the dragon's underside.

He could not evade this one.

He was sure of it, but he still grabbed the right roll bar.

"…!"

He threw his own body to the right and Thunder Fellow moved in kind.

The dragon side-flipped through the air with the tip of its nose at the center of rotation.

They successfully evaded the enemy's bullet which slipped below Thunder Fellow's back. The dragon twisted his body to stabilize his flight, poured power into the accelerators, and regained the speed lost by the side-flip.

"H-Harakawa, moving like that makes me a little sick."

“Then hold on tight, Heo Thunderson. Not that I want to do that too often myself.”

He sighed while continuing to evade.

He could pull off some surprisingly absurd actions. He had thought the dragon was like an aircraft, but it was apparently not.

He realized that a dragon was a creature that could move freely through the sky.

The wings that caught the wind were meant to stabilize its body without using any kind of power and the accelerators were simply meant to supply speed, so he found he could fly in any direction that came to mind.

…I see.

As soon as he thought that, the enemy’s tail approached.

It was slowing down and Thunder Fellow explained why.

“It is stabilizing itself to increase the accuracy of its attacks.”

“That idiot. What good is a dragon if it slows down?”

“Agreed.”

“U-um, I hate to interrupt you two guys when you’re getting along, but we have to do something about this.”

“I know that. Thunder Fellow, do you have any weapons? You’ve got more than those swords, right?”

“I completed the modifications a moment ago and the limiters are under Heo’s control.”

“Eh?” said Heo.

Below the dragon, light began to gather at the end of its folded front legs.

“These are tracking shots. I have enough power to perfectly handle the cooling.”

After a moment, Heo spoke again.

“Um, Thunder Fellow? Do you know the enemy’s weakness or equipment?”

“We have yet to see-…”

“We have seen it. We saw the wreckage of an identical black dragon on the expressway…along with the wreckage of some blue ones.”

Harakawa listened to her quiet words.

“Those people were fighting for happiness, so I don’t want it to be for nothing. If you have any memory of that wreckage, I want to use that as a clue so we can fight alongside them.”

“Understood. I will scan my memory and use that data to estimate the enemy’s weaponry and a method of defeating them.”

Thunder Fellow then called Harakawa’s name and the boy nodded.

“Let’s do this, you two. Let’s win this and then thank them for guiding us to victory.”

The midsized black mechanical dragon created a corridor of bullets behind it and lowered its speed.

It stabilized all of its rear-facing small cannons by fixing the positions of its folded back legs and tail.

It fired toward the blue and white dragon flying inside the barrier formed by the four directions of scattershot.

Thirty-two beams of black light tore through the air and toward Thunder Fellow, but he showed no fear.

He accelerated further and dove into the dancing black lines sweeping through the sky.

“!”

The force of his acceleration compressed the air in front of him until it burst.

With a sound like a paper balloon popping, he flew through a white explosion of water vapor and continued forward.

He forcefully raced through the black lines.

He flew right, up and to the left, down, up and to the right, and finally straight ahead to leave all the black lines behind.

And all the while, he fired his own attacks.

He fired white glowing blasts of lightning from the base of his wings.

The twin lightning strikes flew in arcs as if to slam into the enemy and more were fired in quick succession.

The lightning blasts sounded like tearing paper as they roasted the air and tore into the back of the black dragon without slowing down.

The lightning targeted the small cannons turned toward Thunder Fellow.

While firing again and again, the blue and white dragon continued to move. He took constant evasive actions, but instead of focusing entirely on that, he also fired repeatedly into the enemy’s weapons.

His goal was to destroy the enemy’s weapons on the upper left side to create a safe space.

With sounds of destruction, black fragments flew into the air.

“…!”

The black dragon roared. It might have been a roar of protest, of pain, or of rage.

Its left leg had been damaged. The large armor panels covering the base of the leg had been torn away.

But before those several meter pieces of armor had flown very far, they struck the four scattershot barriers.

But that was all. The cannons located there spewed smoke and fell silent.

With the midsized dragon's left side trailing smoke, Thunder Fellow flew to that side.

But the black dragon took that opportunity to make a forced maneuver: it descended.

"_____"

It let out a bestial cry and quickly lowered down.

The scattershot barrier above also descended, so that ceiling dropped toward Thunder Fellow.

The lower scattershot barrier blew away the expanse of clouds below and Thunder Fellow made a certain decision as the wind roared and dropped down.

The blue and white dragon accelerated.

He moved forward, hopped up a bit, and turned toward the left side of the base of the enemy's tail.

The scattershot cannons creating the upper barrier were located on either side of the tail's base and he targeted the left one.

Positioning himself to fire on the cannon meant moving into the enemy's line of fire.

However, there was a small gap. At the base of the dome-shaped scattershot cannon, there was a one meter space between the actual cannon and where it was attached to the armor.

That created an opening.

Once he arrived within three hundred meters, Thunder Fellow shook his body to the left and right just once in order to align his position.

And from there, he quickly moved forward. His attacks did not slow as the wind roared around him.

"…!"

Countless lightning blasts shot out, his charge never stopped, and the enemy's armor peeled away and into the sky.

However, the scattershot ceiling was dropping quickly.

Nevertheless, the blue and white dragon did not give up on breaking the enemy. It poured lightning blasts into the source of that light that was difficult to see.

The attacks continued at a fast pace.

Lightning strikes could be heard tearing through the air and they joined into a single long bolt of lightning. Countless explosions of light filled the lightning's destination.

The barrier walls lowered and the nighttime cityscape grew larger below the lower wall.

"!"

A moment later, the upper left side of the midsized dragon exploded.

The scattershot cannon had been destroyed and half of the scattershot ceiling disappeared along with it.

The ceiling was not completely gone, but the sky had opened up.

The blue and white dragon accelerated toward that starry sky.

This upwards acceleration was known as an ascent.

He used all of the functions provided by his high-speed cruising form to fly up toward the heavens. On the way, he slipped below the wreckage of the scattershot cannon and arrived above the midsized dragon.

But that black dragon did not give up.

Thunder Fellow saw it open its back and fire a barrage of arcing black homing bullets.

Even if the attack tore into Thunder Fellow, most of it would hit the black dragon itself.

It was prepared to destroy itself for this attack and the blue and white dragon did not choose to evade.

He flew between the black dragon and the black barrage that reached the top of its arc and started dropping back down from above.

An instant later, he chose to descend.

As if allowing the black barrage to pursue him, he pointed straight down from directly above the midsized black dragon.

He made a forced downward acceleration.

Below him was the defenseless opened back of the other dragon.

He continued on.

While dropping and raising his speed, he opened his mouth.

The white light of his dragon cannon could be seen inside that mouth.

“_____”

The sound of the blast resembled a crashing wave.

The pillar of light was more than twenty meters across and it pierced through the midsized mechanical dragon’s back and out its stomach.

And after ending the attack, Thunder Fellow forcibly twisted his body around and slipped past the other dragon’s side. He swiftly moved from the top to the bottom.

With his gaze almost grazing along the empty cityscape on the surface below, he corrected his trajectory to fly forwards. Behind him, he heard the black barrage hit the midsized dragon.

The repeated strikes and explosions of light shook the wind.

“…!”

One especially loud explosion surpassed the blue and white dragon for just an instant, but it was drowned out by the city being destroyed in the machine’s fall.

A few components flew past the blue and white dragon while trailing smoke, but he overtook them again.

And that was all.

He changed his course and flew up into the night sky.

There, Thunder Fellow accelerated and lightly waved his wings up and down as if in thanks.

He was pointed toward the North Star visible in the sky and he saw the lights of Kunitachi and Tachikawa.

A number of shadows were visible in those two cities that the JR Chuo Line ran through.

Those shadows were the black child craft which had already formed up to intercept him.

Thunder Fellow did not hesitate.

He flew straight into that group of shadows.

Diana ran along the railroad.

She was on the Tachikawa end of the elevated portion of the Chuo Line between Kunitachi and Tachikawa. Tachikawa's station was about three hundred meters away.

The nighttime cityscape to the north and south could be seen on either side of that line which ran east to west.

Both Tachikawa and Kunitachi were prosperous around the station, but the rest was filled with residential areas and parks.

She could see a long way through the city.

Above the lights of empty houses, she saw dark shadows in the sky.

They were black mechanical dragons. A formation of a dozen or so of the small child craft flew through the sky. They were lined up at set intervals to form both rows and columns.

But Diana was not fighting them.

Her opponent was a different group of small dragons prepared elsewhere.

And the group she was fighting had just as many as in that aerial formation.

"What a pain!"

She let out a bitter smile and two small mechanical dragons flew toward her from the northern sky to her right.

Black Sun had prepared these small dragons for them.

Only ten minutes before, she had come here with Odor and the others to confront Black Sun and they had set up a defensive line. She had filled the width of the concept space with a paper barrier in preparation for a direct confrontation.

However, Black Sun had prioritized continuing west.

He had rammed his own child craft into the barrier and sacrificed them to open a path.

Odor had sent impact after impact into the giant machine, but Black Sun had ignored them, even as his armor was smashed.

She remembered what Odor had shouted then.

“Are you running!? Are you running, Black Sun!?”

Black Sun had accelerated as if turning his back and he had chosen to continue west even as American UCAT’s mechanical dragons had fired on him and Diana had sent paper attacks at him.

He had left it all to his child craft.

That was just how much he desired the west.

Vesper Cannon was in the Okutama Japanese UCAT building to the west.

That cannon had once shot down Black Sun. White Creation and the other dragons had joined with it so it could evolve into the cannon needed to defeat the similarly evolved Black Sun.

Black Sun feared that simple cannon that had no one to use it.

That’s right, thought Diana. *He understands.*

“The bearer of the weapon to defeat him is headed this way.”

Just as Odor had said, Black Sun was indeed running. He was running from what pursued him.

And that told Diana what she needed to do.

“I can help those pursuing and those waiting up ahead by drawing the enemy to me and defeating them!”

Strength filled her gaze as she looked to the sky to her right.

The two small dragons descending from the night sky were getting close.

Their roar filled the air and she estimated they had arrived within a kilometer of her.

She responded by pulling paper from her pocket and throwing it. The paper flipped around once in the air.

“!”

And the face of one of the swiftly flying mechanical dragons exploded.

Rather than a traditional explosion, the word “pressure” burst and produced a great sound of impact.

The direct hit shattered the armor on the dragon’s face and bent it backwards in the air. It was thrown off course and it crashed into a residential area of north Kunitachi before it could slow down.

However, the other dragon was still alive. Wind wrapped around it as it flew, but…

“!?”

A sudden attack from the upper left slammed into it.

A metallic sound rang out as proof of the hit and the black dragon flipped around before its back crashed into the elevated railroad.

“Oh, dear.”

Diana made a small jump.

At the same time, the elevated railroad was blasted to the side with the sound of breaking stone.

The Chuo Line had one track on the top and one on the bottom and it was made from a metal bridge and a concrete base, but the impact of the dragon created a large curve to the south. The ripped-up metal bridge and the creaking and splitting concrete base expressed just how much force the impact had contained.

Everything obeyed the impact and bent to the south.

At the leading edge of all that, the small mechanical dragon had been bent into a shallow V-shape along its back, but it soon reached the limit of its flexibility.

With the sound of a metal can falling to the floor, its body fully bent.

That was the end. Its body split open at the belly and the metal motors and circulators were exposed to the northern sky. White smoke rose from the framework that still desired to move.

“_____!”

And as a roar escaped its mouth, it exploded.

At the same time, Diana fell. She no longer had the elevated railroad to stand on. The curving railroad’s concrete base had been ripped up from the ground and the entire structure had shifted about five meters southward.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear.”

She brought a hand to her wavy silver hair and instantly pulled out a paper broom.

She tossed it into the empty air below her feet.

“There.”

And she stood on it.

It stopped her fall like a bridge fixed in midair.

She looked around in search of the one who wielded the power that had knocked aside one of the dragons charging toward her.

“Honey?”

She called out but could not find him. She simply heard a sound and saw repeated showers of metal sparks in the western sky toward the station.

He was there and he had likely had the same idea as her, but he had helped her on top of that.

She narrowed her eyes, looked up in the sky, and saw some new opponents flying in an arc through the night sky.

There were three of them, but that was not all. The sound of the railroad’s destruction had disturbed the aerial formation of black mechanical dragons.

The dozen or so small dragons were looking down at her, but she smiled back at their gazes and movements.

“It’s not polite to stare too much at a woman’s face, you know?”

With that question, she stuck both her hands in her hair.

All of the presences in the air responded with motion.

Their first action was either to prepare to accelerate and charge in or to prepare to fire on her.

A moment later, she saw flames bloom in the night sky.

There were seven fiery blossoms in all and the wind had already passed through by the time they appeared.

Diana visually confirmed what had created those flowers.

“Is that…?”

As she spoke, the sound finally reached her. She heard seven metallic sounds of the seven mechanical dragons being sliced in two, the seven muffled explosions, and the single gust of wind that tore through them all and continued into the western sky.

She heard the sound of something flying through that lonely sky.

She heard the westward flight of a blue and white mechanical dragon.

Heo clung directly to their speed in the night sky.

Her five senses had combined with Thunder Fellow. Oddly enough, her senses felt the same as always despite her limbs and face no longer being human.

When she reached out and touched her face, she felt her arm bending like normal and the normal sensation of her fingers. However, her vision saw the mechanical dragon’s front leg bend and touch the armor of its face with its sharp claws.

Thunder Fellow commented on that fact.

“I am applying a two-way conversion to your senses, so there should be no difference from normal.”

She did not entirely understand, but she appreciated the lack of unease over having changed form. In fact, the flow and chill of the air that Thunder Fellow would always be feeling felt ticklish to her. His frame was exposed and only surrounded by a bit of armor, so…

…It feels like I’m naked.

But at the moment, her body was swiftly soaring through the sky.

She could not see Harakawa who was piloting, but she could speak with him.

And her entire body could feel the effects of his piloting.

…*We're moving so fast.*

Her senses were based on Thunder Fellow's and thus accelerated to a certain extent, but it seemed most of the sensory alignment was allotted to Harakawa who needed more processing speed as he piloted.

Currently, he was set so his senses were compressed to about ten times their normal speed while Heo's were closer to five times.

Their speed was approximately 1200 kph, but it felt like 120 kph with Harakawa's sensory speed and 240 with Heo's.

Her eyes could not keep up.

When high in the sky, the ground was so far away that their flight felt slower, but now…

"W-we're flying into the city!!"

She saw the city flying by so close below her that she felt she was going to trip over it. She saw the elevated railroad cutting by from left to right in the distance and she saw a few black forms in the sky overhead.

For some reason, the railroad seemed to bend toward them, but the next thing she knew, they seemed close enough to reach out and touch it.

In an instant, Harakawa desired to draw Thunder Fellow's swords.

Heo gave permission an instant later.

As soon as she did, swords of light shot out on the left and right and she felt them hit something.

Seven somethings, to be exact. Three on the right and four on the left.

They would reach the railroad in an instant.

Heo heard explosions behind them, but she also heard Harakawa's voice.

"This is just a series of one-shot battles. Thunder Fellow, you need to get a little more meat on your bones. You're built too much like a racecar. I wish you were built so it was easier to evade."

"I've heard American UCAT's mechanical dragons can transform. Can you not do that, Thunder Fellow?"

"Look at your own body, Heo Thunderson. The frame is almost entirely built along a single axis to mount the engine. It's a slender build for a high-speed cruising form."

"The transformation mechanism was eliminated during the evolution process," explained Thunder Fellow. "The transforming type switches between high-speed, high-mobility, and combat forms to obtain the benefits of each. This gives them the greatest ability to approach the enemy, but…"

"But?" asked Heo. "But what?"

"They are considerably less durable. The primary frame is delicate and the armor must be made thinner to allow clearance for the moving parts during transformation. It is a good design for attack, but it cannot protect those inside."

And that was what Thunder Fellow wanted least.

"So would reinforcing the frame would make it too heavy and less flexible?" asked Harakawa. "Is that why you made a fixed high-speed frame to ensure the enemy couldn't leave you behind?"

"That is the basic idea."

"I see," said Heo.

That was when Heo spotted someone in the quickly moving scenery. Diana Zonburg stood on the elevated railroad passing by below.

“Teacher!?”

The woman’s usual smile was looking resolutely up at her.

They immediately passed her by.

Heo’s vision was already over a residential district in northern Kunitachi and they began to curve toward Tachikawa Station. It all happened at such high speed that she felt meaningless fear at the speed itself.

However, she managed to regulate her breathing.

…*We are fighting.*

The organization named UCAT was fighting to protect the world. Diana, Roger, the people she had passed by in Okutama, the boy named Sayama she had spoken to on the phone, the pilots of the blue mechanical dragons, and many other people had been fighting in the past, were fighting in the present, and would continue to fight in the future.

“…”

She took a breath. Cold air entered Thunder Fellow’s air cooling system and it chilled her body and mind.

She clung to their speed so she would not be tossed around and she focused on herself once more.

She was using too much of her strength. Harakawa was controlling her body, but she was defending herself against those quick movements. She was desperately clinging to their speed so she would not be thrown off no matter what he did.

“Um,” she called out to check on something. “Are you okay, Harakawa?”

“Yes. I feel like we’ll be blown away if I make the slightest mistake, but I’m getting by.”

“You mean…I’m hard to ride?”

“What are you saying, Heo?”

That question made her wonder if she had said anything odd, but she did understand one thing. Just as she had suspected…

…I’m not holding on.

If anything, she was the one being embraced. She was the one producing the speed, after all.

Um, she began in her mind. *Is Harakawa embracing me? But if I asked him, he’d probably get mad.*

And so she changed her question.

“Uh, Harakawa? Is this fun?”

He raised their speed and accelerated through the sky.

They were approaching the area north of Tachikawa Station, but she no longer felt the fear from before.

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t. It’s been a while since I got to go all out like this.”

“Is that so?”

Heo gave a sigh of relief. She was happy to find he did not hate this weapon of speed she had become. And so she mentally embraced him back as he sat inside of her body.

“It’s fun for me too.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Heo Thunderson. …And Thunder Fellow, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Slowly lower my heightened senses to only five times normal. I’ve gotten the top score in my club’s traditional ‘beat the traffic camera’ contest four terms in a row, so send the extra processing power to Heo.”

“Eh? But, um, I don’t need that much!” she protested. “I’m fine at the same speed as you.”

She was certain that she could leave this to him.

Instead of clinging on to endure it, she had to embrace him back and entrust herself to him.

When they had passed by Diana earlier, she had recalled what the woman had said back at the base.

…A true woman must help a careless gentleman make his way and she must have the consideration to let him take the first step and lead the way

I haven’t made it that far, though, she added with a bitter smile in her heart.

“Let’s go, Harakawa.”

“We’re already on our way, Heo Thunderson. On our way to where the answer lies.”

His instruction to accelerate reached her. It felt like a push on the back and she interpreted it as being embraced from behind. She answered with speed and by embracing his existence within her.

A slight limiter had been placed on their output thus far. It had corresponded to the fear in her mind, but it vanished now.

Thunder Fellow lit the afterburners he had yet to use.

Chapter 33: Announcement of Acceleration

Chapter 33

“Announcement of Acceleration”

To not recognize that which was lost
To recognize that which was lost
To discover which is stronger

To not recognize that which was lost

To recognize that which was lost

To discover which is stronger

At 9:41 PM, several small enemy craft were sent ahead to Japanese UCAT in the mountains of Okutama where the lights of the city center could be seen to the east.

Those small craft tore quickly enough through the eastern sky to call their approach “sudden”.

But instead of showing themselves, they used their optical camouflage concept.

That left their visual form unclear and left only the sound and movements of the wind to indicate their presence as they flew straight down toward UCAT’s runway.

Six roars and four times as many sprays of broken asphalt filled the air. Their weight and momentum tore up the asphalt as they slid across it, but they stopped about halfway down the runway.

Still invisible, only their footprints appeared.

A cannon sat on a pallet in front of the white building at the end of the runway.

All of the footprints turned toward the motionless blue cannon and the leading set took a step toward it.

The asphalt broke and earth trembled.

In that instant, an old man ran out of the southern forest next to the runway.

He spread his lab coat as he ran onto the runway and the words “Manly Spirit” were written in ink on the inside.

He raised his thumb toward all of the invisible enemies and spun around.

“Ha ha ha! Well done making it this far! But your luck ran out the moment I showed up!”

He pointed randomly into empty air as a substitute for pointing at the invisible enemies.

“Get them, everyone!!”

His words reverberated across the runway, but that was all.

“…”

The old man fell silent while still pointing into empty air. He waited for some kind of response, but tilted his head after a few seconds.

“Huh?”

He pulled back his pointing hand, stared at it, pointed again, and looked around him as he spoke again.

“Get them?”

He looked around yet again but still saw nothing.

He checked in the forest behind him, but there was no one there.

He peered deep into the forest with a puzzled look and he crouched down to peer even deeper. He turned to the runway as a feint and quickly turned back around, but still saw no one.

“How strange,” he said while still looking into the forest.

Then something touched the tip of his extended pointer finger.

“Oh, there you are,” he said with a smile.

But once he faced forward again, there was still nothing there.

And yet his finger was touching something. It was touching something invisible.

He gently poked what existed in that seemingly empty air.

“Oh, you’re hiding. …Don’t. Be. So. Shy!”

His final word rose to a shout and he turned around and began to run.

He drew out his full strength from the very first step.

A moment later, a great pressure of air quickly began to run after the fleeing old man.

They raced onward.

The “manly spirit” old man ran out ahead with a great rumbling and smashing of asphalt pursuing him down the runway. He tested out a few different running styles and settled on an intense and girly style.

“Emergency!!”

His shout reached the forest and finally something began to move.

A group of white and blue burst from the northern forest on the opposite side of the runway.

At the lead was a boy in a white armored uniform.

“The enemy fell for our ‘natural’ decoy! Listen! Blow them away without worrying about the decoy!!”

The boy yelled instructions, ran onto the runway, raised his left hand, and looked up into the sky.

“Go ahead!!”

Gunfire filled the air and direct attacks continued after that.

Light exploded on the runway.

“————!!”

Light weapons, heavy weapons, and other projectile weapons struck the invisible enemy from the right using light, explosions, and even large slashes.

The explosive pressure of the direct hits shook the air, the forest, and the sky.

And those armed with close-range weapons charged directly into the blast.

A sword unit led by a boy with a large white sword and a reinforced armor unit from American UCAT both charged right in. They practically slammed their entire bodies into the right sides of the small mechanical dragons that had explosive blasts rising from them.

The attacks hit with countless sounds much like ringing bells.

Fireworks scattered and the colliding force had nowhere to go but up into the sky.

Amid the lingering light of the attacks, the small black dragons’ optical camouflage concept deactivated. They could no longer afford to use any output on that.

They sank down against the attacks from the north and thus from their right and they prepared themselves to fight.

An instant later, they had taken the stance to fire their secondary cannons and swipe with their claws.

But that was when all of those who had approached for close-range attacks took the exact same action: they ducked down.

The small black dragons saw that the firing unit was already preparing to fire again from the forest to their right.

Two girls in white armored uniforms stood in the center of that firing unit. The one with short hair held a white cannon that resembled a spear and the one with long hair rested a cannon almost the size of her body on her shoulder.

“Gather your will power!!”

They fired.

The two blasts rivalled a dragon cannon and they were joined by the rest of the firing unit’s attacks.

“Begin the primary attack!!”

By the time that was over, the boy in command gave a shout and a powerful attack came from the sky.

It took the form of a several dragons a few giants.

There were two giants: a black one and a red one. The black one wielded a sword in both arms while the red one had no shoulders and instead raised six swords. The dragons descending around them were all blue.

They fell directly toward the small black mechanical dragons that had lost control as they tilted to the left.

Giant blades were swung down and the lights of dragon cannons were fired straight down.

The six black dragons cried out and a great rumbling filled the air.

But within it all, the boy in command did not even look to the enemy.

He alone was not looking at the enemy before his eyes.

He instead turned east as an old man ran up behind him.

“M-Mikoto-kun! Deceiving the elderly is wrong! Are you even listening!?”

“I am not, so do not worry.”

The boy even ignored the explosions, light, and wind of the battle as he looked east.

“The second wave is coming!” His voice cut through the others’ cheers. “Sibyl-kun! How close is Black Sun!?”

“Testament.”

A girl with a peaceful expression stepped from the forest with a cell phone between her head and shoulder and a laptop on one hand.

“Black Sun is currently travelling above Haijima and he will arrive in another twenty minutes,” she said. “Also, Sayama-sama, the mechanical dragon of unknown affiliation I reported on earlier is eliminating Black Sun’s child craft while approaching Tachikawa.”

“Unknown affiliation, you say? Let me take care of that.”

He pulled out his cellphone and pressed a button. After a moment, a voice came from it.

“Who is this!? I’m kind of busy right now!”

“I will try to make this as polite as I can, but may I ask a question, you bastard? Japan or America? Choose one.”

“Japan of course! That’s where I live!”

The call suddenly ended and Sayama muttered “what an impatient person” before addressing Sibyl.

“The affiliation of the mechanical dragon is up to Heo Thunderson, but her protector seems to side with Japan.”

“W-wait! I cannot approve of that argument!”

A middle-aged foreigner in glasses cut through the group of blue armored uniforms, but Sayama spoke back to him.

“It is all up to her, Roger-kun. But…” He gave an exasperated sigh. “I cannot believe she would choose to fight when she can simply quit. This will only wear her out.”

Despite his words, he had a smile on his lips as he looked back up into the eastern sky.

A small disturbance of air could be seen along with the lights of Tokyo.

That was the enemy’s second wave and Sayama slowly raised his left hand while staring at it.

“Everyone.”

A total of eight disturbances could be seen in the eastern sky.

Everyone there prepared for a fight when they saw them, but Sayama spoke calmly as he stood in front of them all.

“Listen, everyone. The conclusion awaits.”

They all quietly nodded and Sayama continued with his back to that motion and sound.

“We have seen the past and solved the mysteries of the present. And now a girl who represents our world is making her way between a human who has forget he is human and a machine that has forget himself.” He took a breath. “So what is it we should do? Protect her? Cry for the dragon who cared for his people enough to become a villain? Or simply watch over this battle? What do you say!?”

He turned around and all of the white, blue, and others gave their answers.

They all stomped one foot into the ground and shook their heads.

Someone gave their answer.

“We are the power to end all conflict.”

“We are the spirit to brighten all futures.”

“We are those who learn of all grudges yet continue forward.”

“Yes,” replied Sayama.

He looked to Shinjou, Kazami, Izumo, the combined form of Hiba and Mikage, and to all the others with great power and spirit.

“I am the one who does not hesitate to advance into any and all ill will!”

Meaning…

“Let me say it here: the surname Sayama indicates a villain! And let me say this as well: we will save this caring villain and arrive in the same place as that girl and the others!”

They all nodded and Sayama continued.

“Our duty here is to protect her and drag all the lost memories back into reality!” he shouted. “Listen, everyone. Light the beacon of the showdown and teach this caring villain that this battle is not for those that were lost! Teach him it is for those who will move forward and gain more from here on! Hit him with your fireworks to teach him that we are the bearers of reality and that everything has not come to a stop!! Now, everyone!”

He took a breath.

“Where is your answer!?”

“Testament!!”

Both those that were human and those that were not replied with that binding word.

And Sayama used that as a stepping stone for his next loud words. He swung down his left arm and looked to the disturbances of air approaching in the eastern sky.

“Go ahead!!”

Thunder Fellow flew toward the sky above the north entrance of Tachikawa Station.

The station building stood eight stories from the surface and stretched from east to west.

The north entrance had a large bus roundabout with a terrace and those were surrounded by the city’s buildings.

When arriving from Kunitachi to the east, the only paths away were the roads stretching north and west from the roundabout.

The northern road had four lanes, but the ninety degree right turn would be impossible at their speed.

The western road continued straight on, but it was a narrow road with only two lanes. Also, the multi-tenant buildings lining that road on either side created a canyon, but the canyon gently curved to the northwest which prevented them from seeing what lay ahead.

Flying along the roads in front of Tachikawa Station’s north entrance would mean taking that unknown western route, but Thunder Fellow did so regardless.

He had decided that travelling through the buildings would make them harder to detect from the air. And if the enemy did not aimlessly overlook them, this would give them more chances to fight back.

Lastly, Harakawa was the pilot and he of course knew the streets of Tachikawa.

That was why Heo left the decision in Harakawa’s hands and Thunder Fellow accepted her eagerness.

The blue and white mechanical dragon used all of its current power to soar toward the roundabout north of the station.

Its great speed naturally created a shockwave. The side of the parking deck attached to the eastern end of the station was blown away and the panels making up its walls flew through the air.

The windows of the opposite multi-tenant building burst from a strike to the side and the glass shards and tenants' counters and chairs were blasted into the air.

As Thunder Fellow continued past all that, three small mechanical dragons caught up overhead. They took steep dives to make up for their unsufficient acceleration using the speed of their fall and they tried to shoot the blue and white dragon's back.

However, Thunder Fellow avoided the black light by moving further down.

He was approaching the large terrace covering the roundabout.

He was only about forty meters to the north entrance and terrace, which would take approximately 0.1 seconds to travel at the speed of sound.

The leading two black dragons moved toward each other, tilted a bit so their undersides faced each other, and chose to pass over the terrace.

Thunder Fellow, on the other hand, could only continue straight due to the enemy up above. The last black dragon calmly remained behind to finish him off and dragon cannon light began to gather in its mouth.

His blue and white body was about to crash into the side of the terrace, but just before he did, he lowered even further.

He chose the path below the five meter ceiling of the terrace.

He folded up his tail that functioned like an airplane's tail, pulled up his legs that were used for landing, and launched himself into the darkness below the terrace.

The wind roared and the pursuing dragon missed its time to ascend.

The black dragon collided with the terrace and embedded itself deep in the metal floor.

The intense sound of impact shook the air and the inertial force lifted the terrace a little.

“!”

Ultimately, the black dragon’s body was sliced in two.

The crushed top and bottom halves of its body shot above and below the terrace and its various components and oil were thrown into the air.

The two small dragons pursuing from above the terrace did not turn around.

In only an instant, black light wrapped around the secondary cannons at the base of their front legs. They moved to either side of the pillar in the center of the terrace and they tilted away from each other to view what lay below.

They intended to attack the blue and white dragon the instant it left the terrace.

And after what felt like only a few moments even to their mechanical dragon senses, the time came.

Something flew out from below the west side of the terrace and the two small black dragons fired their secondary cannons on it from either side.

As they continued to fly toward the narrow western road, they watched the destruction of their target.

They both scored direct hits.

Four blasts of black light instantly exploded as if letting out a scream. The explosion struck the ground, bounced back up, and launched their target high into the sky.

The black dragons confirmed its destruction.

But at the same time, they realized they had fired on the wreckage of their comrade.

It was the bottom half of the small black dragon that had been bisected by the terrace.

“…!?”

The blue and white dragon had sent the wreckage ahead of him below the terrace. He had likely thrown it with his gravitational control.

The small dragons momentarily stopped once they realized the truth and that was when something shot out down below them.

It was the blue and white dragon.

Thunder Fellow had drawn his swords. He flew as if running through empty air and let loose his acceleration while piercing the small dragon on the left as if using iai.

The two swords broke through both lungs of the small dragon that was even larger than him.

And he did not stop here.

He accelerated with his enemy still held in place by the swords.

Both of them had tilted ninety degrees to the left, but Thunder Fellow let his acceleration do the talking and chose to exit the roundabout from the west while carrying the black dragon with him.

That took him to the canyon of buildings, but he did not care.

He brought himself and the captured dragon toward the southern buildings, staring with the Daiichi department store next to the station building. He moved in at a shallow diagonal angle that would scrape against the front of the building.

He collided and the expected sound of destruction reverberated along the road.

The manmade stone and glass making up the building greeted the dragon with the sound of everything scattering. The contents of the large bookstore, model shop,

and other tenants were thrown into the air, but the dragon maintained his speed with more acceleration and the force of his inertia.

“——————!!”

Thunder Fellow used the forty meter black mechanical dragon as a surfboard to slip across the side of the buildings. The gentle corner taking the canyon of buildings to the northwest acted like a rising jump for him. He ignited his afterburners and rode the wave of destruction with the screams of the surfboard as his background music.

The one surviving black dragon fired as it approached the corridor, but it was too late. Most of its shots hit the wreckage of the buildings or the black dragon being used as a surfboard.

Thunder Fellow continued to ride the largest wave of destruction of that long autumn night and of the entire year.

But soon, a temporary break in the buildings arrived. He was approaching an intersection.

To jump over that gap, he withdrew his swords.

“!”

And he kicked off the surfboard and into the air.

The black board had already been mostly destroyed by its comrade’s attacks, but as soon as it shot out into the quick gap of the intersection, it crashed into the building on the other side.

After a rumble filled with the sound of shattering glass, the small black dragon exploded.

And that was all.

Thunder Fellow had already jumped to the center of the corridor using his kick off the dragon.

That sharply angled jump brought him to the side of the last black dragon that had accelerated to catch up.

And he had not put away his swords.

The two light swords easily sliced the black armor in two.

He had won, but in that instant, he quickly broke away from the black mechanical dragon.

An instant later, black light pierced into the back of that dragon and out the front.

The instantaneous explosive blast pushed Thunder Fellow onwards and he saw a formation of black dragons pursuing him from behind.

"…"

He accelerated while emitting a groaning sound that resembled grinding one's teeth.

More attacks arrived from behind and he began to hear the windy sound of the enemy's approach.

The sounds and attacks of a literal army slowly grew closer, but…

"Go."

A voice reached him from the roof of the multi-tenant building at the end of the corridor of buildings.

The hoarse voice spoke in English.

Thunder Fellow looked forward without letting up on his speed. The buildings came to an end and two people stood on the roof of the one building that acted as an entrance to the vast sky.

One was a woman holding a paper broom and the other was a slender old man in a suit.

Odor removed his suit coat on the windy roof.

The battle had left the coat in tatters and the bandages around his arms were mostly gone.

He kept his annoyance over losing those bandages from showing on his face as he spoke.

“Go. Go, Heo Thunderson. This is our battlefield.”

He looked past the blue and white mechanical dragon and to the pursuing black dragons.

The blue and white one quickly approached and Odor felt a thought reach him in the instant it passed by overhead.

“Thank you.”

He nodded at the girl’s thoughts.

But the thoughts left behind a question as the dragon began to leave.

“But why?”

“That is simple. That is simple, Heo Thunderson.”

He answered the dragon that had already left and thus could no longer hear him.

He threw aside his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves to reveal his arms sans bandages. The arms were covered in countless scars.

As the passing wind struck the building, he raised his bare left arm.

It was of course scarred and the scars were all from scrapes and abrasions made by someone else.

But that was not all. Diana’s eyes opened wide when she saw something else.

“Honey, what is that?”

He had some special scars on his left arm.

These were from cuts deep enough to reach the muscle. They were clearly whiter and glossier than the others and they protruded from the rest of his skin more as well.

Most notably, these scars formed letters and Diana read them in the wind.

“Richard.”

“That is my real name. That is the real name of the odor. I was constantly called an odor and constantly scarred in the place that took me in, but I gave myself these scars above all the others so that I could trust in my own name,” he said. “Richard. Richard Davis. My father named me after his friend. And now, a girl who carries my father’s blood and has inherited everything from that friend desires help in her fight.”

He turned east toward the approaching black army before continuing.

“Diana. Diana Zonburg. Can I ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

She gave a sigh containing a hint of relief and he spoke with his back turned.

“Our marriage. Let us revoke our marriage. Now that I have spoken the truth I never revealed even to Richard Thunderson, I will accept that girl. I had thought Odor was past having any family, but now…”

“You have a relative to watch over your death instead of me?”

“Yes. Yes, Diana. So we will now part ways and-…”

He stopped when Diana stepped up next to him.

“Unfortunately, that is not possible. I simply can’t help with something that would make that girl sad.”

She formed the largest smile she could.

“And how can I leave you now that I’ve seen such a cute side of you?”

He said nothing in response. He simply raised his left arm and prepared his fingers.

“I did not want to use this! I did not want to use this because it is terribly exhausting!”

He snapped his fingers toward the black dragons flying over a kilometer away.

Heo felt an earthquake.

She wondered how that was possible while in the air and she realized the shaking reverberation came from behind her.

She looked behind with the rear sight devices and saw something unexpected. The city of Tachikawa they had just flown through seemed to have grown quite a bit shorter than when she had seen it before.

…Was that…?

She understood what this meant. The station area had been so bright before, but all that artificial light was gone and they were replaced by sparks and explosive flames in the surrounding sky.

“Thank you.”

“Thanking people is important, Heo Thunderson, but looking where you’re going is also important.”

Eh? she thought as she looked up.

The ground flowing by down below was the railroad stretching west from Tachikawa Station. It was no longer an elevated railroad and it ran straight through a residential district.

When she looked far above that railroad, she saw something else.

“What is that?”

It was a giant black shape so large that it almost looked like a storm cloud.

“Thunder Fellow, what is that?”

“I am sorry. I do not know. But…”

“But it’s our enemy, right? An enemy who was kind and had many friends but who was led to sadness by those very facts,” said Harakawa. “Our ‘enemy’, hm? To be honest, a mere student really shouldn’t be saying something like that. But Heo Thunderson and Thunder Fellow, I don’t think this is anything special.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way I see it, there’s a world where this kind of thing is as normal as breathing. It may be on a whole different level from the small battles in my everyday life, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a small thing on the level of breathing.”

“Harakawa.”

Heo narrowed her mental eyes. Hearing him speak from the heart for once made her smile.

“Then let’s go and breathe, Harakawa. Fortunately, there’s one thing I was taught a long time ago.”

“And what’s that?”

“How to breathe when running.”

Surely…

“I think Black Sun will be my very first rival in reaching the goal line.”

Chapter 34: White Guidance

Chapter 34

“White Guidance”

Let loose the unattractive contents of your heart
Someone else will find them attractive

Let loose the unattractive contents of your heart

Someone else will find them attractive

An intense battle was underway on UCAT's runway.

Their main force of mechanical dragons was down to only two, the black god of war was on its fifth and final sword, and the red god of war only had a single blade left.

Metallic sounds rang out without end and they were joined by the sounds of hard objects being split and of bursting gunpowder.

One could also hear people shouting out special attack names, a man talking about his wife and child, and three people punching a fourth.

As these sounds repeated, the situation began to turn in the people's favor.

In the center of all the movement, a group was firing their weapons. The gunners would surround an individual enemy and then disperse once more.

As they could use their communication devices, each group making close-range strikes could request the assistance of the gunners.

And when the dragons tried to fly and use their quick mobility, the gods of war or mechanical dragons would attack them before they could.

The wreckage of enemy and ally littering the runway functioned as barricades against the dragons as they swooped down.

The Vesper Cannon was simply placed in front of the disguised transportation building, but the black dragons glided so quickly that they would crash into the building if they did not go in for a landing. And it had already been proven that their weight and inertia would cause them to skid even if they did land. That forced them to land much farther back on the runway, but the barricades of

wreckage blocked their way and they would be individually surrounded even if they made it past those barricades.

Of the shooters who unloaded bullets while surrounding the enemy, one looked down on everything else.

It was Kazami who held G-Sp2 as a cannon.

…*This seems to be working well.*

This formation had been Sayama's idea.

She could no longer see him anywhere, but he had apparently entered the transport building to gather the automatons from the purged space.

Shinjou was usually by his side, but she was now exchanging Ex-St's red hot barrel to Kazami's right.

"It's not often you aren't with that idiot."

"And it's strange to see you without Izumo-san."

Izumo was currently attacking with V-Sw and commanding the northern group.

Shinjou looked in that direction and raised Ex-St without bothering to wipe the sweat from her brow or the soot from her cheeks. She had already attached the new barrel and the exhaust of the initial cleaning burst from the back.

With metallic sounds and wind surrounding her, Shinjou faced Kazami.

"Unlike with 3rd, everyone is nearby, so I can relax more. Ryuuji-kun and Mikage-san are here too."

She gave a small smile.

She's changed a bit, thought Kazami when she saw that smile.

She wondered if Shinjou had gotten over what had made her cry the other night and thought about inviting her to go shopping without Sayama.

…I'm like a mother-in-law.

She smiled bitterly while realizing that stupid underclassman would cause some kind of commotion but settle everything in the end.

…If I leave it to him, will I never have to feel that unease I felt in Roger's dream?

That dream had made her realize again what the scariest thing in the world was. It was no one's fault and it was a scene she had been able to see because of who she was. And it was also the scene she least wanted to see.

She had learned how that felt two years ago when she had first learned what it meant to fight, but she had recently started to forget.

She also realized that everyone fighting here had some similar thing.

She had only heard about it secondhand, but she thought the former residents of 5th-Gear must have as well.

"Right."

She nodded and held up G-Sp2, wondering where she should fire the Concept Core blast.

As she did, she heard a voice from the barricade created by a destroyed black mechanical dragon to the east.

"Hey! Something's headed this way on an odd course!"

She saw it. She had good eyes, so she could identify it as six small mechanical dragons approaching in the night sky.

However, their course was indeed odd. They were not invisible as the previous ones had been and they showed no intention of stopping at the other end of the runway. Instead, they continued to accelerate.

“They’re using themselves as shells!”

This was a last resort for the enemy. They would give up on stealing the Vesper Cannon or protecting themselves and instead use their own bodies as shells.

It was a sort of suicide attack.

“Idiots.”

The gunners had their hands full surrounding their individual targets. The close-range attackers were all quite powerful, but there was no way they could intercept these black dragons charging in at full speed.

Then what should they do? Kazami knew the answer.

…I can do it.

And so she yelled to Shinjou who was running to her position.

“Shinjou! Take care of my position too!”

“Sure! But what are you going to do!? You can’t catch up to them even if you fly with X-Wi!”

“Are you looking down on your upperclassman, Shinjou? Just leave it to me. I’ll show you what I’m capable of.”

With that, Kazami began to run toward the barricade to the east.

As she did, Ooki turned toward her while carrying around the green creatures as the commander of the fatigue-elimination unit.

“Oh, Kazami-san! If you’re going somewhere, how about letting these little guys suck the bad stuff out of you?”

That makes it sound like you’re going to bleed me with leeches, she thought while waving her hand horizontally.

She continued on toward the sky visible beyond the barricade.

She began with a slow step but soon built up speed while running between the surrounding people who continued to fight. As her feet began to move faster, she held G-Sp2 under her right arm.

—**Light is power.**

X-Wi expanded and Kazami heard Sibyl's voice from the forest.

"Chisato-sama! They are seventeen seconds from the point of no return on their approach!"

Everyone understood what that meant, so they shifted their focus to her without stopping their attacks.

She ran down the center of the path of focus created by all the attention gathered on her.

This feels nice, she thought. *I really like to stand out, don't I?*

So to stand out even further, she spread her wings wide but did not flap them. She raised the wings toward the heavens and kept them there while she ran low to the ground and faced forward. She faced the sky and the six shapes approaching there.

"G-Sp2, that's our target."

"I see them."

"Then it's time for your third form. You can go that far, can't you?"

"I can go anywhere."

After that, Kazami operated G-Sp2's console while running.

A transformation soon began.

Before her eyes, the firing grip jutted out on either side at the base of the tip to form a T-shaped handle.

The tip had formed the cannon's muzzle, but that tip now closed.

Instead, the bottom end opened, foot pedals extended on either side at the base of the bottom end, and a triangular armored panel sprang out as if to form the tail of an aircraft.

The completed form looked like a wingless airplane.

The same white light used for the cannon began to leak from the open bottom.

After checking on that light, Kazami flew with a single flap of the wings on her back.

"_____"

She placed herself in midair, used the handle as a grip, and placed her feet on the foot pedals.

She was already clinging to G-Sp2 and she spread her wings to the side rather than flapping them again.

This created a vehicle with G-Sp2's output as the thruster and X-Wi as the main wings.

"You can call this the Gungnir Jet!"

終わりのクロニクル

She twisted the accelerator and her falling speed was slowed by the light blasting downwards.

The force of her fall and her ascent reached equilibrium at thirty centimeters above the broken runway.

She twisted the accelerator in her right hand and the white light reflected off the ground and brightly illuminated her and her surroundings.

The sound of squeezing metal came from G-Sp2 and it began to shake, but she ignored it while using her left hand to lower her goggles over her eyes and leaving everything to G-Sp2 by twisting the accelerator as far as it would go.

“Let’s finish this before the goggles leave a mark!”

She reached the night sky in an instant.

“…”

Kazami broke through the wind and suddenly found the mountains spreading out below her.

Before she could exhale even once and before she came back to her senses, she saw a band of light down below.

The three thousand meter runway now looked no longer than thirty centimeters.

…Wow.

A trail of light remained from one end of the runway to her current location and that line of light continued to grow.

That meant G-Sp2 was still accelerating.

Her wings were vibrating from the wind, mist wrapped around G-Sp2's tip, and her pulse began to race. The console in front of her gave a numerical reading on the output, but it was still hovering around 25%.

She recalled that G-Sp2 lost almost all sense of self in this state.

She could not speak with it unless she forcibly turned its focus toward her.

Two years ago, she had reached 32%.

…And today is the second time.

She saw the enemy ahead in the sky. The self-destructive dragons outnumbered her several dozen times over.

She passed by them in an instant.

A moment later, she controlled G-Sp2 in a forceful way that could not quite be called braking.

She removed her feet from the foot pedals, kept her hands on the handle, and threw her body into the air as if on the horizontal bar.

"…!"

She faced the heavens and swung G-Sp2 around.

It was a forced action. While her legs rotated through that extreme high altitude air, her heart pounded in her ears. She began to sweat, but the wind blew even that away in an instant.

Her wings were unable to withstand the wind and shattered, but as those snowflakes of light landed on her back, she found herself looking into the western sky.

And so she twisted the accelerator.

"…"

She received enough intense acceleration and instantaneous power to feel like the night sky was drawing closer.

As G-Sp2 reversed at a sharp diagonal angle and re-accelerated, she dangled alongside it.

With her back pointed down, she followed the horizon out of the corner of her eye and spotted the lights of Saitama.

But at that point, she finally sensed the noise.

Once she realized she could hear the wind, she relaxed a little.

She looked down over her shoulder and saw the six dragons there.

While listening only to the blowing wind, she shrank down with her back still pointed to the ground. The wind washed over her as she gathered strength in her shoulders and abs and brought herself closer to G-Sp2 which flew in a crescent moon arc.

She slowly brought her feet toward the sky, placed them on the foot pedals, and reclaimed her position embracing G-Sp2.

"…!!"

And she immediately kicked the foot pedals up toward the heavens.

The recoil pointed the tip down and toward the enemies below.

She twisted the accelerator and charged forward.

She created new wings on her back, held them in close, and performed a power dive from directly above the enemy force.

"Listen, G-Sp2. There's a story behind your origin."

She whispered while falling and operating the console with her right hand.

“You were originally named Thor’s Hammer and you were created to end a civil war in 10th-Gear. You were stolen by 9th-Gear which had temporarily assisted the resistance force within 10th, but Kaku’s grandfather took you back. However, you were then modified into a divine spear and made into both the most powerful weapon and the storage device to absorb the concepts from 10th’s world tree.”

And…

“But you contained the genes of Zahhak, the violent dragon of 9th-Gear. That created a concept dragon that devoured the world tree, but you were successfully sealed in this world.”

Izumo had told her this. The story included his grandparents. He did not often speak of them, but his grandmother was a resident of 10th-Gear and she had apparently betrayed 10th and given his grandfather the divine spear after the creation of the concept dragon. Kazami did not know the details, but…

…All of that was passed on to create who Kaku and I are now.

She wondered if they would ever be able to inherit all of it.

We will someday, she told herself while facing forward and looking to the earth at the bottom of the sky.

She saw the shadows of the forests and mountains and she saw the group of mechanical dragons flying westward in front of those shadows.

Nevertheless, she calmly made her final preparations by punching seven letters into the console.

“G-U-N-G-N-I-R! Gungnir!”

She pressed the button on the grip.

“Let’s go, G-Sp2. Semi-barrel open – start!”

The bottom end of G-Sp2’s aerial mobility form closed and stopped the jet of light.

Now that the light had nowhere to go, it began to leak from the closed cowling on the front end. As the light spilled out like sand, it rose like smoke and drew several overlapping lines in the sky.

Before she could let out a single breath, the internal pressure caused the front end to shake, but she kept the grip button pressed and refused to let go. It was a lot like making a pet wait for its food.

Down below, the mechanical dragons could be seen so close she felt she could reach out and touch them.

A moment later, she saw the output reading reach 30%.

“Ragnarok open. Time to fight back.”

With those words, she fired G-Sp2.

A dragon plunging headfirst suddenly appeared in the night sky.

The one-horned dragon was made of white light and it seemed almost as large as the night sky itself.

And yet the dragon had yet to show its full body. It was unclear whether it actually had a neck or not, but what looked like the beginnings of one extended down toward the surface as if breaking through the night sky. All that could be seen was a face with a giant gaping maw and that neck-like area extending back twice that length.

But that was enough.

The dragon stretched its head down with a great sound of wind that seemed more like the entire world groaning.

It did not stretch far, but for such a massive dragon, it was enough to reach the surface.

Its jaws devoured its airborne food.

That food was six objects flying down below like small black fish.

They could not escape because the dragon's great size was a weapon in and of itself.

Fangs and a tongue of light crushed that food from above as if the sky itself was falling upon them.

This caused an explosion that rivalled the white light, but…

"_____!!"

The massive jaws closed.

And that was all.

The light dragon head faded away as it descended to the earth.

It simply vanished as if to say its presence had not been particularly impressive.

The light obeyed the darkness and faded away, but an afterimage of the dragon remained in the sky for a few seconds.

Afterwards, nothing remained of the "food", not even the explosion or their wreckage.

However, something new had appeared.

It was a sound arriving from the eastern sky.

It was a solid sound and it was not alone. Metallic sounds repeated again and again as if communicating with each other.

They were the sounds of a battle fought between those flying this way at tremendous speed.

The repeated sounds of high-altitude fighting approached without hiding the noise caused by the colliding power.

All of those on the battlefield began to notice the sounds and look to the night sky. This included the automatons treating people's injuries, the people having their injuries treated, the plant creatures extracting their exhaustion, and the girl who had fired the dragon of light into the sky.

They all looked to the east and someone spoke.

"It's coming."

"Black Sun is?"

"No," said someone else. "The answer. The time has come to settle things with 5th-Gear which cast aside their own humanity, with the machine that went mad with anguish after trying to protect the people, and with the one who has inherited it all."

Black Sun had not overlooked the enemy approaching from behind.

He knew what was happening because the screams of his child craft had reached him several times now.

When a child craft was ordered to die, it would send a report on the completion of its mission when it died. But when one was simply destroyed, intense static was sent back.

For a machine, being destroyed before completing your given job was the same as having the very meaning of your existence denied.

And the bearer of that denial was approaching in a straight line

He remembered this enemy. He had met it in its invisible form just after rising from the ocean.

Black Sun remembered the shape of that wind.

Its shape was familiar, but not because he had seen it earlier. His sealed memories were pointing to the existence of some record of the past as if it was leaking through.

Those sealed memories told him he had met this enemy before.

However, he had a goal: reaching the familiar scent in the west. That was likely the weapon that had once defeated him.

And so he hurried westward. He also sent three midsized mechanical dragons back toward the pursuing enemy as his final guards, but he soon noticed something strange.

As soon as he accelerated forward, static reached him.

Specifically, two bursts of static reached him.

"…?"

His rear sight devices spotted the reason for the static: lightning.

Bolts of lightning raced through the sky behind him and produced two enormous explosions.

Black Sun found this "familiar" as well.

He was oddly certain that he had only ever met one mechanical dragon that attacked like that. He was also certain that the large dragon made as his pair was more offense-oriented and extremely dangerous.

It had carried a large cannon before, but it did not seem to have one now.

But why? he thought. *Why do I remember this despite having no memories?*

He did not know.

He had been made to protect the people, so why had he fought such a dangerous dragon?

Why had he lost that battle, why had he lost his memories, and why had he chosen to evolve?

Why was his urge to seek out those familiar scents so very strong?

And beyond those questions, beyond his destination, and beyond his victory, were the people waiting for him? If he created a world where he could protect the people, would they praise him?

The people were gone now and he did not know why, but he thought they had to exist somewhere. He was meant to protect the people and he existed, therefore the people he was to protect also had to exist. That was the logic behind his thoughts.

Beyond the barrage of lightning, he saw a familiar yet forgotten form.

It was a small blue and white mechanical dragon.

This enemy was small but dangerous. He wished he could eliminate that familiar feeling along with his lost memories. That would rid him of these unnecessary thoughts, but he could not forget what he could not first remember.

At that point, Black Sun reached a certain answer.

He found the reason for his evolution.

"…"

It was this enemy. He prefaced that high-probability conclusion with the qualifier "most likely" and raised his internal priority of this enemy.

He set the familiar scent in the west and the familiar scent pursuing him at equal priority levels.

Here, he entered combat mobility mode for the first time.

He would intercept this enemy. Even as he hurried to the west, he would intercept the past.

Black Sun ordered the final midsized dragon to ram the enemy while continuing to evade the lightning and he accepted his own intent to fight.

He consciously approved of that intent and his entire body responded. The armor panels opened up to expose every primary cannon, secondary cannon, and even sub-secondary cannon and his motors sent out lubricant and made full use of their radiators.

Finally, he raised the power output supplied by the one thing he had certainly brought from his own world: the Concept Core half.

As long as he had that, he had half of justice on his side.

Its power circulated through his entire body.

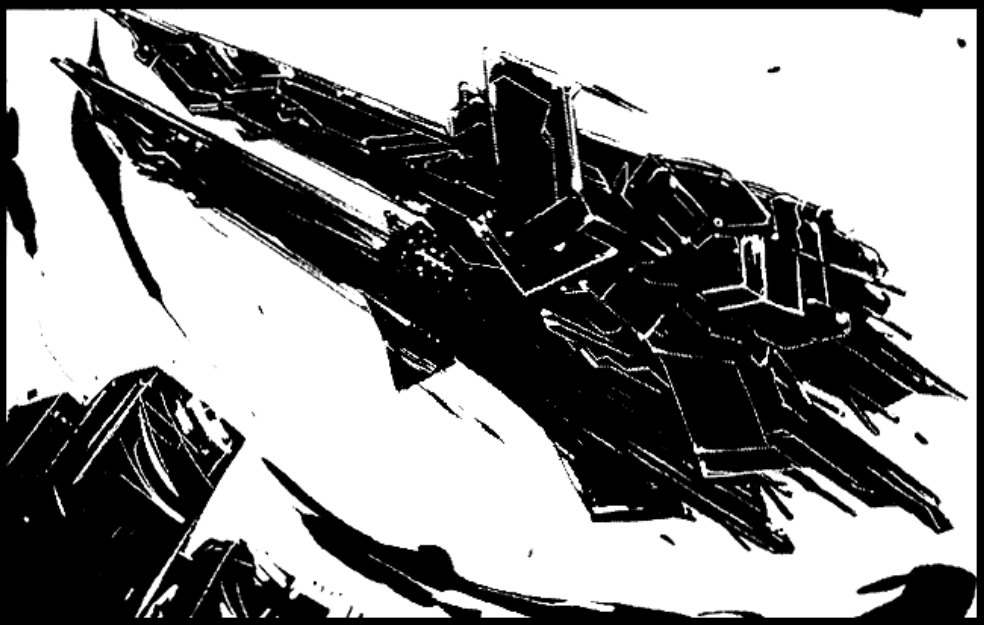
“All cannons at full power. Enter overdrive mode.”

Black Sun began to move in order to defeat his enemy.

Chapter 35: Black Guidance

Chapter 35

“Black Guidance”



I want to be praised

I want to be praised

Heo managed Thunder Fellow's body and Harakawa piloted it in a clash with their enemy.

That enemy's firepower surpassed their own.

That enemy's physical strikes surpassed their own.

That enemy's armor surpassed their own.

Nevertheless, rejection filled Heo's will.

Their speed was greater.

Their mobility was greater.

Their will was greater.

Nevertheless, questions filled Heo's will.

Why did that enemy fight?

What did he seek?

And what would be his answer?

Let's go, she thought.

Let's fight, she thought.

Let's find that answer, she thought.

She currently had the body of a high-speed cruising mechanical dragon.

She was attacking a black dragon that was heavily armed.

White lightning and black shots crossed paths, the former hit and were deflected, and the latter grazed by and tore away armor.

However, Thunder Fellow found an instantaneous opening and circled above Black Sun. From the sky behind Black Sun, he accelerated straight toward the front of that black dragon.

He passed above the twin-fuselage wings that looked like buildings. Even at the speed of sound, it would take almost two seconds to travel across those six hundred meter wings. And Black Sun was also accelerating, so Thunder Fellow's relative speed was dropping.

With her senses sped up five times over, the coming approach would last a few dozen seconds for Heo.

The sound of wind echoed off Black Sun, but Thunder Fellow left even that sound behind. The blue and white mechanical dragon no longer hesitated as he flew across Black Sun's right wing.

He had a plan.

Black Sun's main body was a black mechanical dragon measuring three hundred meters long and it existed in the rear center of the twin-fuselage. It was guarded by the protective field of that twin-fuselage and by its many cannons, so it would not be easy to approach.

However, there was an instant at which Black Sun's main body was defenseless: when the main cannon on the bottom of that main body was fired.

If Thunder Fellow fired his main cannon at that moment, it would reach his enemy.

During their first meeting, his light had been blocked by the main cannon's acceleration light created between the twin-fuselage wings.

But what if he passed those and fired at extreme close range?

…We can do this.

They needed to fire the main cannon and to do that they needed to circle around and face the enemy.

That was why Thunder Fellow travelled over the twin-fuselage wings and fired.

Twin bolts of lightning tore into the armor panels as he travelled ever forward.

It all happened at high speed.

The cannons on the twin-fuselage wings responded with their black light.

The attacks were all at close enough range to leave no room for evading a shot after it had already been fired.

To avoid them, Thunder Fellow needed to predict the attacks by the direction Black Sun's cannons pointed and whether they contained black light or not.

Making those predictive evasions was Harakawa's role.

His reflexes forced the high speed cruising craft all over the place and Heo felt those movements as movements of her own body.

…We can do this!

Black Sun's attacks were numerous, but they were no different from his normal attacks. Once Harakawa memorized the cannons' timing, he could take them out one at a time and destroy the twin-fuselage wings.

However…

"Black Sun's heat level is rising!!" warned Thunder Fellow.

At the same time, Heo saw the area above Black Sun – the area they were flying through – transform into an area of destruction.

Every cannon was firing continuously.

In an instant, Black Sun's top surface became a temple filled with thousands of black pillars.

However, those "pillars" were cannon blasts supported by Black Sun's massive firepower. This attack's true form was countless massive swords of continuous light that ignored the heat radiating from them.

"…!"

But rather than as swords, everything before them rushed toward them as pure attacks.

Heo gulped, but spoke with strength in her voice.

"Harakawa!"

"It's like having a group of thugs pick a fight with you, isn't it!?"

The tension in his voice belied his light words.

But Thunder Fellow began to move nonetheless.

He no longer had time to fire his lightning attacks, so he emitted swords of light from his wings, pushed past or cut through the approaching black blades, and continued forward.

"…!!"

Even so, his armor was torn away in several places all over his body.

Several of his swords of light broke, but each time they did, they were pulled out and produce a tremendous cut.

Metallic sounds sliced through the black forest made of black pillars. His speed never dropped as the few dozen seconds seemed to stretch on infinitely.

Heo felt pain because her senses were the same as Thunder Fellow's.

…But this is drawing out his true ability!

She did not reject the pain. She simply gave Harakawa permission and squeezed out all of her own strength.

All she could hear were the surrounding sounds of clashing light and darkness and a voice.

“Can’t we open a path with our main cannon!?” asked Harakawa.

“No. It is only for a slight moment, but I must stop in the instant of firing to cut off the reflux of power. If I do that, we will be destroyed. Also, you know when we must fire the main cannon, don’t you?”

“Hah,” laughed Harakawa within the shaking of shockwaves. “You’re going to blast that thing’s main body once we get through all this and circle around in front, right? The instant he fires his main cannon is the instant the inside of the twin-fuselage and his own front armor are removed. Also…”

Harakawa trailed off and Heo found that odd, so she asked him about it.

“What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just that I saw something strange just before we were shot down when facing Black Sun the first time. It was…” He hesitated again. “Something that shouldn’t have been there.”

“H-Harakawa. Did the tension of the battle make you go crazy?”

“We need to have a talk after this is over, Heo Thunderson.”

As she listened to him, one of their light swords broke on a black pillar that was quickly swung toward them on the right side.

The sword shattered with the sound of breaking glass, but it produced enough of a gap in the attacks for the mechanical dragon to slip through.

The same cycle repeated again and again.

Nevertheless, the dragon kept at it. He was almost at the end and the pillars were growing less dense.

But it was still a balancing act until he truly did reach the end.

Heo thought she heard Harakawa groan, so she quickly spoke up

“Um, Thunder Fellow? Do you have any other good weapons? Y’know, um, something you would see on that Captain Nuclear cartoon that’s popular in America.”

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Why are you watching that environmental destruction cartoon?”

“I-I was trying to be considerate, so why are you two being so serious!?” she shouted.

“My only other weapon is the Vesper Cannon. The only other thing would be too dangerous to use now.”

“There’s something else?”

“There is, but it is not a weapon. It has also never been tested and a test activation would be too dangerous now that the battle has begun.”

“But…”

Just as Harakawa began to reply, Heo felt something odd.

It was a sound being sensed by Thunder Fellow’s entire body. The auditory devices located across the dragon’s body were picking up something unnatural.

There was a hole of silence behind them.

“Harakawa! Something’s coming from behind!!”

A moment later, something shot through all the black pillars behind them.

The front-facing sub-main cannon at the base of the twin-fuselage had fired on them.

Black Sun's plan had been to surround them with the countless black blades and then fire this piercing shot.

"What a cheap trick!!"

Heo made up her mind in an instant and left all of her sensory acceleration with Harakawa.

And in exchange, Thunder Fellow took action.

What Heo saw him do was not what she had expected.

Harakawa swung Thunder Fellow's left blade to the left and shut down the right blade.

Shutting down the blade meant to protect their side should have meant being hit on that side, but Heo did not wonder why he had done this.

…Please take care of this!

Her only decision now was to trust him.

A moment later, lightning raced from Thunder Fellow's right side and it was directed straight down.

A cannon was located there and the lightning blast gouged out the dome-shaped weapon and blew it backwards.

And as the black spear of an attack approached from behind, it collided with the wreckage of the destroyed cannon.

That weakened it and she heard Harakawa raise his voice.

"Let's turn this around, Heo Thunderson!!"

Black Sun watched the movements of the blue and white mechanical dragon.

That enemy's left sword strike broke through several of the black pillars sticking up toward the sky.

The enemy then flew into the gap this created on the left.

But the enemy could not avoid everything. Even if he broke through the pillars on the left, the bases had not been broken and the interrupted blast would recover quickly.

And he could not cover all of the black pillars coming from the right.

On top of all that, there was the sub-main cannon blast from behind. It had been weakened, but it was still plenty powerful as it struck the blue and white dragon that closed its rear thrusters for defense.

But despite the hit, the dragon somehow managed to endure.

He purged most of his armor and opened various parts along his body to allow the excess heat and force to escape. He had lost armor and gathered heat, but he still flew into the empty space on the left.

That meant the space between the twin-fuselage wings.

Black Sun had been waiting for this. His prey had entered within range of his main cannon.

He had already prepared his main cannon to fire, so the eight black pillars between the wings had gathered strength and the cannon below his body was wrapped in black heat.

But the blue and white had done the same.

While almost tumbling in between his wings, the enemy had rotated around and white light had already gathered in that enemy's mouth as he prepared to fire his own main cannon.

Both dragons faced each other and they adjusted their power in just an instant.

They would fire at almost the exact same time, but that was acceptable from Black Sun's point of view. Their base power outputs were different, so he was guaranteed to win in a collision between their main cannons.

He had already scanned the output of the other dragon and he knew the time it took that dragon to fire its main cannon thanks to the child craft he had sacrificed. On top of all that, he had altered his calculations to include a slight increase in ability as the blue and white dragon continued to fight.

The calculations were flawless.

The blue and white dragon would fire its main cannon, but the black main cannon would swallow up that white light.

That was the expected outcome, but the other dragon's dragon cannon fired too suddenly.

The cannon's light had converged and finished its firing preparations slightly before Black Sun's had.

"…!?"

Black Sun saw what should have been impossible as the blue and white dragon fired a scattering beam of white light.

That was when he saw someone inside the cockpit in the enemy's head.

In fact, he saw two people.

Just before firing his main cannon, the other dragon had released the power taking them inside him. He had gathered every last bit of power into his main cannon and finally accelerated that power.

“_____”

Black Sun saw the white light spreading out before him, but he was certain of one future: his victory.

His sight devices saw a black form fly in front of the approaching white light.

It was the final midsized mechanical dragon.

The white light scored a direct hit, but it could not penetrate all the way through the midsized dragon. Its armor broke, the light tore into its underside, and that light reached its back, but the dragon continued to move.

Black Sun ordered the child craft to seize the enemy.

And it did exactly that. It poured everything into its unharmed wings, slipped between the twin-fuselage wings that contained black pillars of lightning, and collided with the blue and white dragon.

A metallic sound rang out like a bell as the midsized dragon carried out its duty despite beginning to fall apart.

Its three hundred meter body desperately grappled with the thirty meter dragon.

The girl in the rear seat of the enemy’s cockpit had vanished. She had combined with the mechanical dragon once more.

An odd sensation came over Black Sun when he saw that. It was the same as the familiar scent.

Had he once known that kind of thing?

But he ignored it because the girl was a human of this world, not of his world.

The blue and white dragon moved its legs in an attempt to break free of the black midsized craft’s bonds, but it was no use.

The high-speed cruising dragon lacked close-quarters combat ability and he did not have a transformable frame, so there was nothing he could do. He might have stood a chance as a close-quarters combat model or a standard cruising model that could move its legs more, though.

Black Sun fired his main cannon.

A great roar rang out and black light filled his vision.

“_____”

The midsized dragon gave one last cry to say it had completed its mission.

A corridor was filled with white light.

The north wall contained a bathroom, a bath, a kitchenette, and the landing of the stairs down to the next floor, but all of them remained dark.

The south wall contained a counter with a large space behind it and several rooms with white wooden doors.

The label on the counter said “Nurse Station” and the neighboring rooms had the names of patients on the doors.

This was a hospital ward.

One of the wooden doors to those rooms was open.

It was the door labelled “Harakawa Yui”.

The room inside was dark and the light attached to the bed was the only illumination.

Someone in light purple pajamas stepped out into the corridor as if emerging behind the door.

It was Yui.

Her hair was damp and she had a white bath towel over her shoulders as she walked to the nurse station. Her slippers made little noise, but they sounded plenty loud in the silent hospital.

The baby room which contained the newborns was located beyond the nurse station.

The baby room's wall was made into a window and two young women were peering through that glass wall.

When Yui saw them, she wondered if they were new mothers looking to their children inside.

As she walked past the nurse station, someone called out to her.

"Yui-san," said a young nurse.

After spending so many years here, Yui treated this nurse as her junior and the nurse treated her in kind.

The nurse grabbed some karinto from a glass container.

"Want some?"

"No thanks. I already brushed my teeth."

Yui shook her head and the nurse smiled bitterly.

"Taking a walk?"

"Oh, yes. I was having trouble sleeping. I had a guest today, after all."

"Your son, right? Um…"

The woman trailed off and it likely had to do with her son's appearance, but Yui replied with a tone that said she did not mind.

“He takes after my husband more. …And I’m proud of that. But today I had someone else visit.”

“Someone else? You mean that teacher who always trips and can never find the stairs when she leaves?”

“No, not her either. …I guess you could call her my son’s girlfriend.”

“Oh?” The nurse drew back with a smile, placed the container on the desk, and held her hands together. “Well, congratulations. If anything comes of it, have them come here.”

After saying that, the nurse gave a quick “ah” of realization.

“What is it?” asked Yui with a tilt of her head.

“Well, today’s garbage today.”

“Oh,” said Yui with a strongly bitter smile. This happened occasionally, so she knew what the woman was trying to say. “You mean the apple skin, right?”

“Yes. After cleaning, Tama-san always shows me the apple skin when you do that. It doesn’t matter how often I say not to pull trash out in front of people.” Her bitter smile grew stronger as well. “Peeling it in a single continuous strip isn’t easy. And you do it with a one centimeter width, too. But…”

“But?”

“There were two today, weren’t there? Was the other one by your son’s girlfriend?”

“Oh? Why do you think that? It’s my special skill.”

“Well,” she looked up at the ceiling for a moment as she hesitated whether to say it or not. “One of them was even thinner. It was so thin it shocked Tama-san and stopped the head nurse from scolding her like usual.”

“And which one do you think was mine?”

The bitterness left Yui's smile as she looked to the nurse.

The nurse met her gaze for a moment.

"Well…"

"Let me tell you something interesting. I gained that skill while competing with an old friend. The men we worked with liked fruit, so we had plenty of opportunities. That friend of mine was incredibly good at it and I still haven't reached her level."

"Is there really a monster like that out there?'

"There was one here today, wasn't there? And this girl worked even faster than my old friend did."

Yui turned to the right in order to return to her room.

"Yui-san, weren't you going to take a walk?"

"I feel better now. Our talk helped me relax. I'm sure it will work out now. Oh, and one other thing."

She rested her elbows on the counter and showed her teeth.

"Can I have a karinto? I can always brush my teeth again."

Black Sun saw the explosive flames in the sky.

Smoke and flames remained in the dark sky between the large twin-fuselage structure added to his wings.

That was both the final remains of his army and the remains of his enemy.

The wreckage was smashed to pieces and melted and now the wind would simply blow the smoke away.

His sight devices had already turned his thermal and gravitational vision to the west, but he still made sure to record the final attack with every one of his sight devices.

And due to the trailing smoke, his optical vision required the longest time to record.

Finally, the wind cleared away the smoke.

There was nothing there.

Black Sun saw nothing but sky all the way to his destination in the west.

He diverted more power to his accelerators, closed the armor panels that he had expanded for defense, and deployed some small airplane-like wings. He also stored his main cannon in his underside as he slowly moved forward.

This world's characteristic stars could be seen in the dark sky overhead, but a question came to his mind.

This world – the planet he was on – had a satellite. It circled the planet at a set interval and the sun gave it the illusion of waxing and waning as it did so, but was it visible in the sky tonight?

Black Sun turned his optical sight up to the night sky and saw a circle of white light.

However, this was not the satellite he was looking for.

This was the light of an attack. It was the gathering light of the blue and white dragon preparing its main cannon to fire.

"…!"

Black Sun immediately changed his vision to a scan of the enemy.

This was definitely the previous mechanical dragon, but his form had changed.

Somehow, his pointed high-speed cruising form had become a close-quarters combat form with larger legs.

“_____!!”

The beast’s roar descended from the sky and his entire body collided with Black Sun.

An intense sound filled the air as heavy metals crashed into each other.

With a deeply lasting impact, the other dragon’s four arms dug into Black Sun’s back at the base of his twin-fuselage wings.

This intense landing had enough force to break the framework of a transforming model, but Black Sun’s upper vision told him his enemy was unharmed.

The blue and white mechanical dragon on top of him had the thick frame of a non-transforming model.

He did not understand.

He considered the possibility that there were two enemies, but the boy in the pilot’s seat was the same as before.

He simply did not understand.

And as soon as this inexplicable fact filled him with confusion, the enemy fired his pre-prepared white main cannon into Black Sun’s back.

The direct impact of the explosive blast was of course a problem, but the shockwave that spread from that point of impact tore up his armor to quickly open a hole of destruction. The second and third shockwaves tore into the inside and outside of the additional armor and smashed the connections between the main body’s wings and the twin-fuselage wings.

“_____!!”

Black Sun made an instantaneous decision.

He purged it all and cast it aside. He cast aside the twin-fuselage wings, additional armor, accelerators, and everything else he had added onto his main body through evolution.

Black Sun's three hundred meter form shot backwards as if stripping off an empty shell.

He was the same size as the midsized craft modeled after him, but his power, armor, and firepower were all superior to theirs.

He quickly put half a kilometer between himself and the purged twin-fuselage and he made a decision.

The enemy's identity was a mystery, but he simply had to defeat that enemy.

For a weapon, he had the main cannon which had evolved below his main body where he held it in his legs. Its power would drop without the pressurization of the twin-fuselage, but it was still powerful enough to pierce through the sky. More importantly, he would not have to wait as long to fire it.

Currently, the enemy was trying to remove his legs that were embedded in the back of the falling twin-fuselage.

In its close-combat form, it could not fly freely enough to nimbly evade the main cannon blast.

And so Black Sun immediately fired.

His goal was simply to pierce through both the enemy and cast-off twin-fuselage wings and to make those wings explode.

The black light raced out and first pierced into the twin-fuselage wings. The black structure still retained some of the residual power from its job as a pressurizer and it shook as it was pierced through during its fall.

"!"

A massive explosion scattered black smoke and red flames through the air.

The great noise reverberated through the sky and the air trembled as if from an earthquake.

The great voice of the explosion was numbingly loud, but Black Sun did not let his guard down. He made full use of his vision's scanning ability and worked to detect his enemy.

Sure enough, he saw the enemy rising to the heavens on the other side of the blossoming flames.

"…!"

The blue and white mechanical dragon was unharmed. Shimmering heat burst from his rear accelerators as he attempted to circle around overhead to reach Black Sun.

The enemy had changed form again. The muscular body of the close-combat form had grown pointed and his four legs were spread out as wings. Looking at his framework, he was clearly a non-transforming normal cruising mechanical dragon.

Based on the timing of his flight, the enemy had to have quickly transformed from the close-combat form to escape the explosion.

This meant the enemy could transform despite being a non-transforming model.

That should not have been possible.

However, Black Sun grasped the enemy's trick, the enemy's evolution, and the enemy's will.

"_____"

Black Sun changed his line of thinking: the enemy had chosen a different path of evolution than he had.

When he had lost to the enemy army, he had chosen to evolve an army to support himself.

But this enemy had desired to become a powerful single unit rather than strengthening that army.

Black Sun understood that this was a dangerous enemy.

And so he accelerated his lightened body to the western sky where he detected that familiar scent.

He could not allow the enemy to obtain the weapon there, so he accelerated in order to destroy it first.

As they approached Black Sun from above, Harakawa saw the dragon begin to race away.

“Is he trying to run!?”

“No! He is after the Vesper Cannon! He wants to destroy the weapon that can truly defeat him!”

“In that case,” muttered Harakawa while shifting from a descent to a pursuit of Black Sun. “Heo.”

He called her name, but it was so sudden that she was unable to reply.

“Are you listening, Heo Thunderson?’

“Oh, y-yes! What is it?”

He could see Black Sun’s back accelerating away up ahead. The dragon’s speed was enough to leave them behind in their normal cruising form, but Harakawa spoke calmly.

“It’s time to run. We can see the goal line and so can our opponent.”

“Right!”

Harakawa felt Thunder Fellow take in a slight breath. The breath gathered strength in his gut as if making up his mind.

And then he heard Heo's voice.

"Let's go, Harakawa, Thunder Fellow. It's time to move the legs that stopped so long ago."

Harakawa nodded, closed his eyes, and muttered the words that would set it all in motion.

"On your mark."

He felt Thunder Fellow prepare and take in a breath as if drawing a thread taut.

"Get set."

And he shouted.

"Go ahead!!"

From a crouching start, Heo kicked herself forward and began to run.

Her fellow runner was Black Sun and he had already taken a false start, but she did not care.

She had long ago learned that victory would come to the true sportsman who played fair.

And even if he had cheated to get ahead, that cheating would mean nothing once she lined up alongside him.

When she took the first step, she changed to a running stance.

However, she did not say anything. She had begun to focus on nothing but running. Just like breathing, she changed to her running stance so naturally that she did not even notice.

In this case, her running stance was her high-speed cruising form.

They had used this system earlier in order to escape the midsized black dragon and avoid Black Sun's attack.

It was the untested system that Thunder Fellow had been hesitant to use.

Heo now saw it activate and change her current body.

It began with a single action: a dismantling.

Scraping sounds reverberated from her entire body as she broke it down.

Every part making up her body – the head, torso, legs, tail, wings, armor, and everything else – had their bolts removed.

Gravitational control removed tens of thousands of bolts which floated in the air as the blue and white dragon's body split away from the primary frame that formed the core of his body.

That steel-colored primary frame was normally hidden inside, but it was now exposed.

That frame was currently a normal mobility type. It revealed the dragon's figure as a spine with connectors for the four legs, various types of armor panels, and the metal bones of the legs.

However, that framework was swallowed up by empty air and vanished. It had entered Thunder Fellow's concept space.

The sound of colliding metal was the first thing to arrive in its place.

Next, a long, narrow, and pointed gathering of steel was ejected from that space.

This was the primary frame for the high-speed cruising form.

The blue and white mechanical dragon had swapped out his framework at the most fundamental level.

He did not transform and he did not have a fixed form; he would remodel himself.

As his head, torso, legs, and wings floated in midair, they pressed against the frame. And they were placed differently from the normal cruising form. The front legs would be in the way during flight, so they were placed below the torso as ballast for stability. Next, the legs extended backwards with no intention of every having them set foot on the ground. Lastly, the tail was placed on the very back like an airplane's tail.

Transformations were restricted by the movement range of the frame and other parts, but Thunder Fellow was different. He completely dismantled himself and completely altered the parts' locations with no concern for their original connections. This allowed him to use the optimal positions for durability, air resistance, and power connections.

He had decided to use this system in order to escape the midsized dragon earlier.

It had succeeded and, during this third use, the moving parts let out cries of joy at achieving the shortest and most efficient cycle.

The temporarily separated wires reconnected along the shortest routes and his new form allowed him to bring forth his most happy power.

With a soft sound of metal, everything was set in place.

That was when tens of thousands of bolts gave a harmony of connection.

The countless metallic noises sounded like the tones of brass instruments.

All of that happened in an instant to give Thunder Fellow a high-speed cruising form.

“Complete.”

And that gave Heo her running stance.

She took the first step, accepted the power Harakawa sent to the rear accelerators, and kicked off the air behind her.

She accelerated.

The great force lifted the front of her body, but she bent her spine a little to hold herself down. She then took the next step like a spring extending forward and launched herself further ahead.

Rather than just lift her knees, she also thrust them forward.

She ran.

She did not move her legs in vain, she did not build up too much momentum and lose her balance, and she did not allow the position of her hips to rise or fall. She simply continued moving her body forward and raising her speed.

Repeating that was known as sprinting and the wind it created was known as a gust.

Her focus narrowed her vision down to a single point ahead of her.

Her increased senses had yet to be reinstated after avoiding the attack earlier and she was not looking at anything in particular as her surroundings rushed by her so quickly. She simply watched the darkness of the night, the overhead wiring of the railroad down below, and the black form not far ahead of her.

At the moment, all she had to do was overtake that dragon which had once been a friend of man.

The sound of her breathing and her pulse were all she could feel.

She did not hear or feel her surroundings.

Hearing and thinking had already left her understanding.

終わりのクロニクル

The word “wholeheartedly” no longer applied. She had emptied her heart and mind as she ran.

She understood nothing, but…

“_____”

She had wanted to run here.

This was where she had wanted to run for so long. Running here would give her an answer to everything she did not understand.

And so she ran through all the unknowns. She ran toward the goal line that lay ahead.

“…!”

She accelerated and threw her body forward.

Harakawa simply leaned forward.

They had already passed through the city, left the outskirts, and flown into the mountains.

Slowly but surely, Black Sun’s form was growing closer to the upper right.

Thunder Fellow’s acceleration had already brought them through an explosion of water vapor and several streams of mist wrapped around the front ends of the dragon’s various parts as he tore through the atmosphere.

The same was true of Black Sun to the upper right. Waving lines of water vapor were wrapped around the large black dragon as he accelerated westward.

Harakawa thought about where Black Sun was headed.

Sayama and his own mother had said IAI contained an organization named UCAT.

That was likely the dragon's destination deep in the mountains of Okutama.

Down below, the Oume line left Ikusabata which told him how much farther to Okutama.

"About fifteen kilometers!"

At that point, he saw light to the upper left.

Black Sun was accelerating and that speed pushed his giant black form forward.

…That bastard!!

Even if he was powerful, he still had air resistance and his own weight to deal with. Thunder Fellow should have had an overwhelming speed advantage over that three hundred meter dragon.

"Did he wish to evolve again after his experience fighting an enemy faster than any before?"

Black Sun's wish had been granted, even if he still did not know the identity or past of his opponent.

But that was true of them as well. They had known nothing.

"But that's different now. Listen, Thunder Fellow," said Harakawa. "Return my senses to normal and give it all to Heo's running so she can live up to the past."

He received no response, but everything around him gave the answer.

His vision was now linked with their actual speed.

"…!"

But he was not afraid. He simply leaned forward to pour on more acceleration.

Without even a moment's hesitation, he took in the power supplied by Heo. *That's enough,* he thought in a world moving too quickly for him to see. *This is your will and your power.*

As if to prove that this was her full strength, the world sped up even more.

Only Black Sun was visible to the upper right due to his similar speed.

The giant black form was growing closer. Amid the dense flow of the world around them, the ever-accelerating Black Sun slowly lined up alongside his vision.

But then Black Sun accelerated even further.

"How many more gears does he have hidden away!?" shouted Harakawa.

But then he heard a voice.

"_____"

It was the quiet sound of someone's mind leaking into the cockpit.

As Heo ran, the mind she was no longer aware of gave off a quiet noise much like radio static.

It took the form of a song.

It was a hymn Harakawa would hear at the base or the hospital on Christmas Eve.

And it was the song his family had sung the night his father had passed away.

Had it been the same for her?

"Silent night, holy night."

They split the coming wind with a bursting sound.

"Long we hoped that He might."

They accelerated as if kicking their body forward.

“As our Lord, free us of wrath.”

But Black Sun gave another blast of acceleration.

“Since times of our fathers He hath.”

Black Sun slowly began to pull away.

“Promised to spare all mankind.”

But Harakawa recalled a certain fact.

“Promised to spare all mankind.”

He remembered when he had timed Heo on the hundred meters. She had said her personal best was 13 seconds.

Her time at the fifty meter line had been in the upper half of six seconds. She could never have gotten thirteen seconds at that pace.

But he had said something back then.

“Heo Thunderson.”

He said it again even though she could not hear him.

“You’re the type that does better on the second half!”

And that proved accurate.

The mechanical dragon body that had already accelerated so much suddenly shook as if jumping up, but Harakawa knew what that meant.

“Are we beginning to accelerate!?”

That was exactly what happened.

In just an instant, it looked to Harakawa like they had launched Black Sun backwards.

They overtook him and their intense series of accelerations did not stop there.

Their speed continued to rise and he simply leaned his entire body forward. He felt like he was leading her, like he was standing on the goal line and calling her toward him.

They continued on.

The ground below was dark as they entered the mountains.

He felt a presence approaching from behind and saw Black Sun's nose out of the corner of his right eye.

There was a lot he wanted to say: things he did not understand, things that angered him, and much more. However, he gathered all that into a single cry.

"Win this, Heo Thunderson!"

A moment later, they reached the goal line.

The tape they were meant to break was made of light.

Harakawa recognized the band of light from his time on the base.

It was a runway's signal lights.

But as he shifted his balance backwards to slow Thunder Fellow, he realized it was not working.

At this rate, they would pass right over UCAT.

And he knew why: Heo was not granting him permission to pilot.

"Heo!?"

He received no response. Not from Heo anyway.

“It is no use, Harakawa. She has passed out.”

After the continuous tension of the battle and her victory in the race that followed, everything she had been holding onto must have shattered and turned to exhaustion.

He was sure he could wake her and Thunder Fellow could resuscitate her, but there was no time. They would travel the three thousand meters of the runway in only a few seconds at their supersonic speed.

…What do I do!?

He thought and let go of the roll bars on either side.

“…”

And then he found the answer.

Black Sun realized his loss had turned to victory.

Beyond the band of light and beyond the wreckage of his child craft, he found the familiar object. He knew he would be in constant danger if he did not destroy that.

The enemy had arrived first, but for some reason, that enemy was not making a move to collect it. After all, he was not slowing down.

Black Sun had been planning to ram the enemy in the moment he tried to collect it, but he now scanned the enemy.

That was when he realized the enemy had lost control.

Based on the enemy’s course, he would pass over the building behind the cannon.

Even if he slowed down now, he was moving too fast to collect the cannon. He would either crash into the building or destroy the cannon due to the difference in relative speed.

Black Sun calmly chose to fall in behind the enemy.

And he prepared his main cannon.

However, his sight devices captured a certain movement: the false humans were frantically moving about on the runway down below.

But there were more than just people there.

He also saw a group of automatons and…

Sayama stood on the ground between the runway and the white building with a cellphone to his ear.

“It is fortunate you remembered I had called and that your phone has a callback number, Harakawa!!”

He hung up just as the blue and white mechanical dragon was about to pass by overhead.

“Here they come, everyone! Are you ready!?”

“Testament!!”

Sayama looked around as everyone around him replied.

On the runway and in front of the building were people in white armored uniforms, people in blue armored uniforms, automatons, and plant creatures.

Sayama raised his voice toward them all while waving his left arm sideways at shoulder height and then raising just the forearm.

“Begin!!”

As that word carried through the air, gunfire shot up from the surface.

It was a volley of signal guns.

The flying bullets and beams all shot toward Black Sun who pursued the blue and white dragon.

Their quick approach ended in an instant and both clear sounds and sparks filled the air.

And a response came from the sky.

Black attacks poured down like rain. Straight-line unguided shots flew toward the shooters.

“!”

But the close-range attack unit struck the black light with their armor and weapons.

Their swords shattered and their armor split, but they let out spirited cries.

Their defense had been a success. They were not unharmed, but no one had been lost.

However, it was not over yet.

The wind moved. It was a large and gentle wind.

The wind came from the Vesper Cannon which sat in front of the building.

The forty meter cannon was being lifted up.

And this was done by a black giant named Susamikado.

Susamikado used both arms to lift the Vesper Cannon overhead. The wings on its back expelled heat to maintain its balance while shimmering heat shot out around it.

“Ryuuji-kun!”

“We can do this!!” replied Hiba as he lifted the cannon.

He tossed the Vesper Cannon into the air for just an instant and adjusted his grip from below. He pointed it up at a sharp angle as if preparing to throw it like a spear.

And then Susamikado flapped its wings.

“Oh!”

While holding a cannon several times longer than itself, Susamikado forcibly spread its wings.

It floated up slowly and heavily, but it rose several meters.

A force that could no longer be called wind exploded in the space between the ground and its wings.

However, the god of war’s body and the weapon would not rise any further. They came to a stop and started to fall.

“Dammit!” shouted Hiba. “Is there nothing to help with this!?”

“Ryuuji-kun!” said Mikage’s voice. “We promised to take a bath together if this went well, remember!?”

“I’d forgotten about that!!”

He forced it. He used the acceleration of the wings to power the throwing motion and scorching wind burst from the motors across his body.

“!!”

And he threw it.

The cannon flew into the center of the sky and toward the nose of the blue and white mechanical dragon flying there.

But its acceleration was still not enough. At this rate, the dragon would run into it with too much relative speed.

In that instant, an orderly female voice came from the front of the building.

“Get ready!!”

It was #8. A total of more than sixty automatons in maid uniforms were lined up in front of her.

All of them were holding hands.

“Launch it!!”

With that command, space seemed to bend. A massive gravity lens was created at the center of the ring of sixty maids and it flew upwards as a gathering of pressure.

It was directed toward the Vesper Cannon which had been thrown into the air.

The gravity lens surrounded the cannon with a roar and launched it as if it had been hit with a racket.

“_____!”

There was only one possible destination for the flying cannon: the same direction as the blue and white mechanical dragon meant to receive it.

Thunder Fellow caught up to the Vesper Cannon that flew ahead of him.

His entire body dismantled.

He then placed his body around the Vesper Cannon's mount instead of his primary frame. A normal mechanical dragon could not hold the long cannon because their frame got in the way, but he could truly become one with it by removing his frame and holding it in his arms.

The bolts gouged into the gaps of the different parts.

"…!"

The dragon and cannon connected together and Harakawa gave a shout from the cockpit.

"Heo!"

And again.

"Can you hear me, Heo Thunderson!?"

"Ah…"

A groan of awakening filled the cockpit, soon followed by a gasp.

"U-um, I…"

"You only passed out. The battle isn't over yet, but…you did well."

Silence answered his final comment, but then…

"Th-thank you." She sounded hesitant. "But, um, sorry. It was all so amazing and I'd never felt anything like that before, so I passed out."

"It isn't time yet for the nonsensical post-victory interview. …The lonely dragon is on his way."

Black Sun had not given up and Thunder Fellow's voice gave proof of their fears.

"He has already begun gathering power in his main cannon. We can connect and charge up at the same time, but I do not know if we will make it in time. And I

am sure Black Sun knows that. He will build up power to just barely fire first and divert all other power to aid his attack."

Black Sun moved forward to line up alongside them.

He was less than one hundred meters away and continued to move forward.

"Is he approaching so we can't even make a low-power shot!?"

A moment later, Black Sun drew his swords. Long black swords appeared from each shoulder.

"He cannot fire on us either if he approaches," shouted Thunder Fellow. "Charge up using the Vesper Cannon's power! Until then, fight back with my own power!!"

The large and small mechanical dragons soaring high in the sky began fighting with gunfire and extreme close-quarters combat.

They exchanged bullets and sword blows while taking repeated evasive actions.

They attacked each other from a position that prevented the other from moving away but close enough to threaten a collision.

The white blades were stopped by the black blades and the black blades were avoided by the blue and white dragon.

That blue and white dragon flew about as a torrent of black gunfire shot his way and avoided it all by reducing the surface area the attacks could hit. At the same time, he put away his swords and fired blasts of lightning, but the black dragon deflected them into the sky with his black blades.

The two dragons approached, clashed, fired, flipped their bodies around, and took a spiraling course through the sky.

Sounds of metal, of firing, and of bursting light intersected many times over and carried through the air.

The dragons were followed by shimmering heat and trails of white clouds created as they tore through the atmosphere.

They swung their entire bodies, accelerated their slashes, repeatedly fired, and evaded.

And a mixture of all those actions repeated at incredible speed.

Both of them let out cries and both of their paths through the sky intersected.

“Let’s…let’s end this!!”

It was like taking your partner’s proffered hand.

It was like supporting and rotating your partner on a turn.

It was like facing your partner and pressing your cheeks together.

“Please remember the people who meant so much to you!!”

The avoided gunfire tore through the sky and air, the blocked gunfire sent countless sparks flying through the sky, and the broken swords scattered in a spray before being replaced.

They rotated as if exchanging places, they did not let up on their attacks or evasions, the black dragon had its back to the sky, the blue and white dragon had its back to the earth, and a moment later they exchanged positions once more.

The only thing that remained unchanged was that they were both soaring.

The two dragons roared and danced through the night sky. Their attacks and evasions were the quick and unfaltering steps of that dance.

When they defended, they would strike back. When struck back at, they would defend. There was no time lag. They passed back and forth an embodiment of the word “attack”.

But their dance came to an end.

The long cannon on the bottom of the black dragon finished gathering black light.

That was when the unseen space that was their destination closed.

A change came over that space.

It moved upwards as if to create a way to escape.

Sensing that, the black dragon lowered his speed to move outside the dancing movements of the blue and white dragon.

The blue and white one responded by changing his course and rising into the sky.

They moved apart so they could both fire. After ascending and coming to a gentle stop, the blue and white dragon suddenly began fly in circles. And these circles spiraled down toward the black dragon whose back was to the earth.

White light surrounded the long cannon on the bottom of the blue and white dragon, but it was still weak.

Nevertheless, he fired.

A straight line of light tore down from the heavens and toward the earth. It ripped apart the air and created a bursting ring of wind while continuing to target the large black dragon down below. And as if to strengthen his aim, the blue and white dragon accelerated.

He moved to slam his entire body into the black dragon.

The black dragon looked up into the sky to face him.

“_____!!”

With a great roar, he fired.

A roar ran through the earth. The trees of the mountains far below were tossed up as the mountain surface shook and it almost looked like the mountain itself swelled up.

The recoil of the blast smashed the earth within a dozen or so kilometers of the black dragon.

The black light containing all that force spread out as if to envelope the entire sky, but it soon converged once more.

The concept cannon pierced upwards toward the heavens.

The descending white light was easily swallowed up.

This would end everything.

But the moment before the blast struck, something was destroyed.

The power diving blue and white dragon broke apart.

But this was an intentional dismantling.

"…!?"

Two objects descended through the black light piercing vertically through the center of the night sky.

One was the cannon held by the blue and white dragon.

The other was the blue and white dragon itself sans primary frame.

However, their falling speed was too great. Before the blue and white dragon could reattach its framework, it had passed by the larger dragon. Not only that, but it had already fired. Even if it grabbed the falling cannon once more, it would take time to recharge.

The cannon- and frame-less mechanical dragon passed by the black dragon's side.

Wondering what had happened, the black dragon tried to turn around.

As he did, he caught sight of a point in the sky.

In the center of the heavens, he saw a single star directly to the north.

But he also saw a silhouette in front of that star.

It was a human boy's silhouette.

This boy stood on the black mechanical dragon's nose.

Harakawa stood on the giant black mechanical dragon's nose.

He was gasping for breath and the tension of this gamble ruled his body.

Using the cannon as a diversion, they had dismantled Thunder Fellow both to evade and to use the dragon's gravitational control to send Harakawa here.

It had gone well, but…

"I saw it when we first faced each other, but you probably didn't since it's right between your giant sight devices."

Harakawa reached out a hand toward something white sticking out from between Black Sun's eyes. It was shaped like a shaft and he gave its identity.

"A spear. …Heo's great-grandfather most likely got this attack in on you."

He grabbed it. Most of the shaft was shaped like a battery pack and there was something like a trigger near the tip. For some reason, Harakawa's surname was written on the side of the white shaft: Northwind.

He found that odd, but pulled it out nonetheless.

As soon as he raised it overhead, Black Sun turned the light in his sight devices toward the boy.

The small cannons on his shoulders also aimed at the boy.

But Harakawa had no reason to be concerned. He pulled the trigger and felt a power in the tip of the spear slice through the wind. It was a great invisible piercing power that almost seemed to be made of wind.

“Remember this!” shouted Harakawa. “The north wind will pierce even the dragon!!”

With a clear sound, he slammed the long extending blade between the great dragon’s eyes.

“And remember what it is you are meant to do!!”

With a squeezing resistance, the blade penetrated into Black Sun’s head.

“…!!”

And after thrusting the blade down to the base, the spear broke. Whether it had overloaded or completed its duty, the white shaft shattered like pottery and scattered into the sky.

“_____!”

Black Sun let out a great cry.

As that cry shook his body and reached his ears, Harakawa leaped into empty air.

He passed between the wings and armor panels on the black dragon’s back and said farewell to its giant form.

As the wind rushed past him in his fall, he saw the darkness of the earth down below, but another color filled the center of that darkness.

Thunder Fellow waited to catch him in the open cockpit down below and white light filled the cannon he held.

The sign of the conclusion could be seen from Japanese UCAT's runway.

The Kanda Laboratory had altered the concept space to remove it from the city center and instead stretch it almost to satellite orbit far beyond the stratosphere.

The darkness filling that concept space was pierced by a single white line rising upwards.

Everyone saw that white light break through the black mechanical dragon's chest and out his back.

And another light was visible as well.

That light came from the girl and boy standing in front of the white building.

They were Shinjou and Sayama.

Shinjou tugged on Sayama's sleeve as he looked into the western sky.

"What is it?"

"Um," replied Shinjou after making sure everyone else was focused on the west. "About this."

She extended her left hand. That hand wore Georgius which was wrapped in light.

She frowned and tilted her head.

"What does this mean? Why can I wear it?"

“I do not know and it seemed the old man did not either. All I know is that my mother left Georgius with me and that only the two of us can use it, Shinjou-kun.”

Sayama reached into his pocket and pulled out the papers Roger had given him.

“I still cannot read a single word of the conceptually hidden contents, but I can read the cover now. How about you?”

Shinjou looked down at the cover.

It gave Sayama Asagi’s name as the primary developer, but it said something else as well.

“The research and development was based on some abandoned documents found in the Kinugasa residence?”

She turned toward him in surprise.

“What does that mean? Had Professor Tenkyou started to create Georgius?”

“I plan to find that out for myself. Just as you will pursue Shinjou Yukio, I will follow in my father’s footsteps.”

He then pointed at another point on the cover where a stamp had turned black when the copy was made. The black letters of the stamp said “Project Suspended”.

“It is also worth knowing why we hold in our hands the product of a project that was suspended.”

Shinjou grew pale but slowly nodded as if to support his words.

And then the people around them gasped.

“Look,” said a surprised voice. “Black Sun is rising into the sky.”

Black Sun remembered everything.

The blow into his head had fully activated his self-preservation functions. Similar to having his life flash before his eyes, it drew out all of his knowledge and experiences. This told him there was no saving him and…

…I remember.

Black Sun's mind grew clear and his memories returned.

"…"

And once he knew everything, he chose to rise into the sky with his fatally wounded body.

He moved toward the night, toward the sky, and toward the heavens so that he could look out over this world. From those heavens, he could confirm that this world would never be his and that it would never belong to the people he knew.

It would show him that the people who might praise him were no more.

The large black dragon rose.

He moved his wings and lifted his breaking body in his desire to move ever upward. After countless evolutions, he had gained powerful weapons, sturdy armor, and great speed, but this ascent was all he could manage now.

It's ending, he decided. *No, it was already over.*

He had destroyed his people.

Even if it had been to keep them from suffering and even if it he had been ordered to do so, he had still destroyed the world he was meant to protect.

He had trapped himself in the shell of "malfunctioning" and believed in the justification of his actions.

That had come from his refusal to accept that the people were gone and his refusal to accept that his world had been destroyed.

He had lost before the battle had even begun.

Yet he had once more taken a great number of lives and done what he should never have done.

The earth grew smaller down below.

He could see an island. Unlike the islands of the planets he had protected, it was a long, narrow archipelago.

The ocean surrounded it and another large island lay beyond that.

He belatedly realized that everything would grow dark because he was on the night-side of the planet. The planets he had once protected had had the same natural phenomenon.

The people who had created him had often asked how the world looked to him as he flew.

He had always replied that it had planets and it had people.

"…"

He could see the cities of this land too. They could be seen everywhere as dots of light.

The cities of this world's people could be seen even in the darkness of night.

And he also saw the end of the planet. The horizon formed an arc and he visually confirmed that this world was a round planet.

He altered his vision to amplify the light so he could see everything.

Once he did that, he saw a blue planet.

It is the same, he concluded. *It matches how I always described the world to the people.*

The people had always looked satisfied with that answer and they had praised him. They had told him to do his best which was only natural for a machine, but he had viewed it as an expression of praise and he had used it to judge how well he had completed his job.

He recalled his own creator.

That creator had been a man in glasses. The man had once brought his wife and daughter to the hangar for a periodic inspection.

The young girl had seemed afraid of his appearance, but she had run after him when he had flown from the hangar. He remembered how she had raced along the ground, waving at him and apologizing for being afraid. He had intentionally slowed so he could pretend to race her, but he remembered ultimately turning his back.

There had to be similar people in this world. Compared to the people of his world, they were indeed fake, but they were the real people for this world.

I am sorry, thought Black Sun while admitting to his error. *I did something unforgivable.*

Even if he wanted to make up for it, his body was already broken and falling apart.

He could not even stop his own destruction and make up for his mistakes. His only remaining option was to inform the world of his loss so its people could rest easy.

He would tell them that he was no more.

He did not think of himself as a failed creation. He felt that he himself had chosen failure. Because his own compassion had led him to lose sight of his reason for existing, he had chosen a path of failure.

But…

“…?”

He saw something rising up after him down below.

The blue and white mechanical dragon was rising up in front of him.

The other dragon’s movements and heat distribution showed it had no intention of fighting and he could not have fought back even if it had.

So for a short time, he slowed his ascent and stopped.

As he watched, the other dragon set up an atmospheric protection field and opened the cockpit in the head.

Two people sat in that cockpit: the boy who had made the strike to his head and the girl who had combined with the dragon.

The girl looked up at him while standing on the seat with her shoes off.

Why? wondered Black Sun. *Why do you look on the verge of tears despite winning?*

He was the one who had tried to take everything from her and from this world.

But that was over now. Black Sun named himself to the victor so that a record of his loss would remain and so that everyone would know who was responsible for it all.

“I am Black Sun.”

He transmitted his voice and it played from the other dragon’s cockpit.

When she heard the name, the girl lightly held her own body, took in a breath, and spoke.

She spoke her own name.

“_____”

Black Sun heard the name.

It meant happiness in the language of his own world, and…

“…”

Yes, thought Black Sun. *I am glad I did not destroy that dragon. I am glad I was able to hear that name.*

He recalled his own mission. It was the same as his brother craft White Creation: to protect the people and through that…

…To guide the people to happiness.

That was something he could no longer do after all the lives he had taken.

Nevertheless, a result had survived to stand before him. This was a survivor of the answer that had destroyed him.

He was reunited with the answer of the people he could never meet again.

He did not understand.

He had been unable to fulfill his mission, so why was he able to hear that answer?

Why had he received this answer through his own destruction?

He did not know.

But he accepted his end. The end of his body and the end of his mission.

He would never again destroy another. And to prove it, he opened his chest and pulled out the Concept Core half. He used his gravitational control to pull out the thirty centimeter ball of bluish white light and sealed it in a gravity shell so it could be safely touched.

Finally, he gave it to the girl who had inherited the world he knew.

She hesitantly accepted it in her hands.

“U-um!”

Without waiting for her to finish speaking and without listening, Black Sun looked up into the center of the heavens.

There, he saw a star. It was the same solitary star he had seen from the surface.

He began to ascend as if to take that star for himself. He moved to leave this world and reach a place where there was nothing to protect but also nothing to harm. He made his way toward a place where he could watch over everything that had been lost because of him.

Was the girl below waving to him?

One who has inherited the happiness of the world I was meant to protect, I wish happiness on you and your world.

“_____”

Black Sun cried out. He gave one last roar of joy.

And he continued his self-destructive ascent. He regretted everything he had done, but he felt he had fulfilled the very first mission he had been given.

And he decided that was the one and greatest happiness he had received from the people.

At 10:12, all of those in the concept space saw a light born in the sky near the North Star.

The light was far too small for the name Black Sun, but it was sharp and bright.

That was Black Sun’s signal to say they had reached the goal.

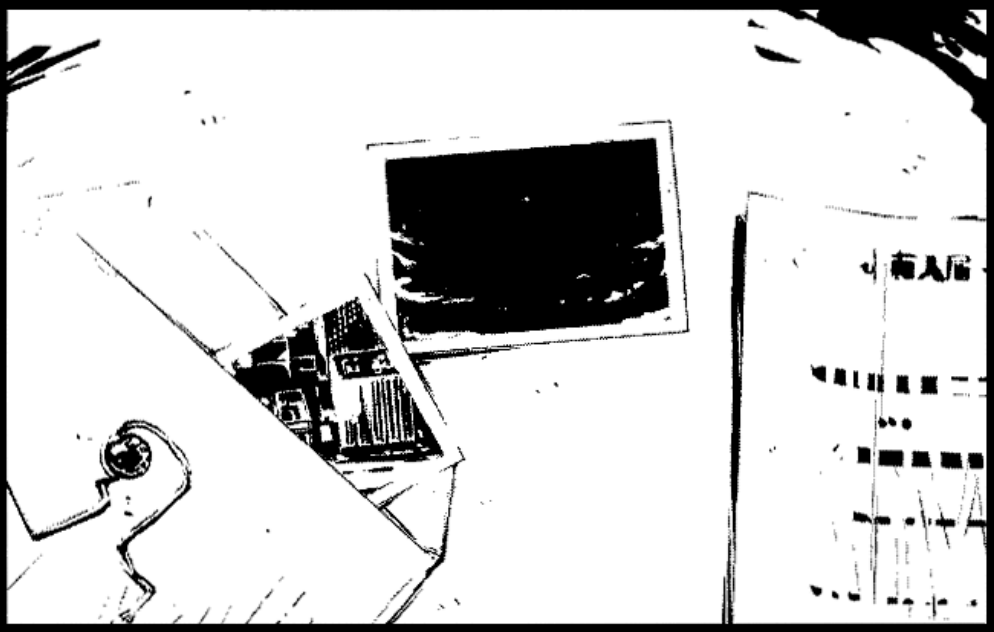
Afterwards, the light slowly and quietly vanished.

All that remained was the wind blowing in from the north. That unseen wind blew roughly through the night.

Final Chapter: Where the Wind Reaches

Final Chapter

“Where the Wind Reaches”



It is not an easy place to notice
It is not a not an easy place to leave once you do notice it
It is everywhere

End.

It is not an easy place to notice

It is not a not an easy place to leave once you do notice it

It is everywhere

The broad blue sky looked almost transparent.

The ground below was covered by the yellow and red of sand and rocks, but those colors were joined by an artificial gray.

The sandy wasteland contained a long runway, a few buildings, and a group of warehouses.

Those manmade structures had a distinct smell, but that faded toward the end of the runway.

A single person stood at that midway point between man and nature.

It was a tall young man with the sleeves of his flight suit rolled up. His blond hair was brushed back and his blue eyes looked up at the identically colored sky.

However, a male voice suddenly called out from behind.

“Oh, James Davis. You actually came back?”

“Don’t make it sound like you doubted I would, Richard Thunderson.”

As the young man named Davis turned around, a bottle was pressed against his chest.

“You can celebrate your return with this. I swiped it from Lord Northwind’s room, so drink it and throw it out here.”

The second young man had the top half of his flight suit removed. His skin was tanned and his blond hair was cut short.

“So how was your wife?”

Thunderson asked with his eyebrows slightly lowered and Davis shrugged.

“Not good.”

But he must have thought that was not enough because he forced a smile and continued.

“Even the doctor told me I need to be there when she gives birth. She’s apparently going to have twins.”

“Well that part’s good news at least.”

“But her family won’t stop telling me to leave the kids with them if anything happens. …They aren’t bad people. In fact, I’d say they’re good people, but still.”

“Their only daughter was stolen away by a flyboy with no known relatives. You should have expected this.”

“You’re right.” Davis looked up into the sky. “She told me she would call me when the kids will be born and she told me to keep flying until then.”

“…”

“Don’t fall silent, Thunderson. It’s creepy.”

“Then am I supposed to give my thoughts? Should I call it a tearjerking story?”

In that instant, a shadow passed by overhead.

“————!”

The shadow instantly flew by from east to west and left something behind: wind.

“!!”

That wind stirred up the wasteland, tore into the sky, and wrapped its arms around the two men.

By the time its embrace left them, they were already looking into the western sky.

Thunderson clicked his tongue.

“Damn that kid Curt! I thought I’d dealt with him by putting him and Lyle in Team A with you, but he’s been fighting back by flying almost as recklessly as me.”

“Sounds like I need to give you a warning before moving on to him.”

“Oh, c’mon. Do you really think a man who hasn’t held the stick for three months now can give me a warning?”

“Hmph.” Davis crossed his arms. “I’ll have you know I flew a civilian piston engine everyday while I was gone.”

“Well that would be why your wife’s family doesn’t like you, you idiot. …C’mere.”

Thunderson began walking down the runway and toward the hangar.

He looked over his shoulder with a smile.

“Curt doesn’t know, so he just used up his training time for the week, but we’re bringing out the new models today. Both Team A’s and Team B’s. We’ll be the first to pilot those two craft we put so much into.”

“And those will be the prototypes we test from now on?”

“Right. Sounds great, doesn’t it? Remember how I said I don’t really know what the point of this fight is? Well, that’s why I like having events like this and other opportunities to fly.” He stopped smiling. “While the others are out fighting a war, we’re working out the kinks of the new craft and creating the final prototype that will most likely determine the design direction American UCAT’s air force takes from now on.”

“You sure are selfish.”

“For taking part in this fight without knowing why?”

“No.” Davis held up the bottle he had been given. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Thunderson’s serious expression crumbled into a bitter smile.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t get so depressing with a man who just returned from the world below. …How about we hide that in Essert’s locker to give him a scare. That idiot showed off his reverse spin cornering in the 90R when taking Lord Northwind into town last week, so Lord Northwind pinned him to the window.”

“Sounds like there’s no one worthwhile in your team either.”

“Yeah, and that’s why one of them died.”

“I heard. Hughes, right? That makes two with Ohara.”

Davis began walking in long strides to catch up with Thunderson.

“Let’s do our job right. Let’s make sure we won’t feel ashamed to anyone. After all, the sky is a place to be sought, not a place for shame.”

“I agree with you on that one.”

“Right,” said Davis while opening the bottle.

Thunderson frowned while watching him take a swig.

“Are you planning to make the first flight drunk? Where’d you learn a bad habit like that?”

“You’re the one that gave me the bottle. And besides, I said I’ve been piloting a civilian piston engine for three months, remember? Ever heard of a grassroots race? You drink a bottle after each circuit and the first one to vomit has to go land. How about it?”

Thunderson instantly took the proffered bottle.

He brought it to his mouth and gulped down even more than Davis had.

“I discussed it with my wife,” said Davis as he watched Thunderson tilt up the bottle. “If they are twins and one of them is a boy…we’re thinking of naming him Richard.”

Thunderson spat out the drink and Davis watched him hold his nose and tremble.

“I’m glad to see you’re excited enough to give a full-body celebration.”

“Don’t be stupid. What kind of joke is this?”

“It’s simple. This way, I won’t feel any guilt if I have to physically discipline him.”

Davis laughed loudly and from the gut. The laugh carried up into the sky.

“I told my wife he would surely grow up to be a man like you. One who rejects others, acts superior to everyone else, and believes that he’s always right about everything, but at the same time, truly hopes he’s wrong.”

“That’s about the worst kind of person you can be.”

Thunderson clicked his tongue, threw the bottle into the air, and watched the sunlight reflect off of it.

“Then if you have a daughter, I’ll tell her what an idiot her father is. And I’ll tell her to name her own kid after her father. That way, the idiot germs will assume he’s already infected and avoid him.”

“That sounds wonderful. But if I have a daughter, I’m sure she’ll take after my wife. She’ll be a liar, but one who’s always thinking about others.”

After the sound of the shattering bottle, Davis’s voice continued.

“I am so very happy right now.”

As the two of them approached the hangar, two forms left it.

Trucks were pulling out two mechanical dragons that had tires protruding from their landing legs.

The two dragons of blue and white waited beyond the shimmering heat rising from the runway.

“Hey,” said Thunderson while putting his flight suit the rest of the way on. “I’m sure your wife is happy too.

“Yes. And that is why I will go meet her where our happiness coincides.” Davis raised his right arm. “Now, let’s go.”

They were off to their own battlefield.

Heo saw a dimly-lit space.

“…?”

She felt like she was dreaming. Two men stood below the blue sky. One had the same surname as her and the other had the same surname as the great-uncle she had first met that day.

She felt like she was dozing and she did not understand the dream she was having.

…But…

She thought the two men seemed to be having fun.

She then lifted her head from what she was using as a pillow.

She looked around and found a large room faintly lit by emergency lights.

This was Japanese UCAT’s cafeteria. All of the tables had been removed and countless people were lying on the floor.

All of them slept with blankets over them and the blue and white armored uniforms were mixed together indiscriminately. Some creatures made of plants slept next to everyone and they slowly expelled oxygen.

Everyone had eaten, drank, and celebrated here until they grew tired.

Before going to sleep, she had decided she would live with Harakawa from now on. He had complained, but her great-uncle had said he was too busy to look after her and the negotiator boy had played a certain recording for them. The recording was the boy's proof that Harakawa was deeply obsessed with figures.

Her great-uncle had not looked happy, but she was sure Roger would smooth things over. After all, he and the negotiator boy had apparently planned together to ask her where she wanted to live.

She had also desired to continue working with the Leviathan Road, so she had received the role of temporary inspector from American UCAT.

As Harakawa had been linked as Thunder Fellow's pilot, he was given a temporary position in Japanese UCAT.

She looked around now and saw the group who had visited Harakawa's house sleeping nearby.

She also saw someone moving between them: Harakawa's homeroom teacher.

The woman walked around and fixed any blanket that had fallen out of place. At the moment, she fixed the blanket covering a girl and her black cat. That was the girl who had shown up partway through the party and harshly questioned everyone as to why she had not been called.

Heo began to get up in order to help, but the woman noticed and shook her head with a smile.

Heo accepted the refusal because her body still desired sleep.

As she pulled up her blanket in order to go back to sleep, she heard a song.

Someone was singing in their sleep nearby.

She looked over and found a girl sleeping in a sitting position. She wore a white armored uniform and her long black hair swayed as she slept and sang to the negotiator boy who slept with his head on her lap.

Heo also saw a small animal within arm's reach on the boy's head.

She could hear the song because the girl seemed to be singing it as a lullaby for the boy.

"Silent night, holy night

"Long we hoped that He might,

"As our Lord, free us of wrath,

"Since times of our fathers He hath

"Promised to spare all mankind

"Promised to spare all mankind."

The faint song that almost sounded like humming replayed in Heo's heart.

Her mother had sung her that song long ago.

"…"

She silently pulled the blanket over her head and lay down to rest

Only once she placed her head back on what she was using as a pillow did she realize it was Harakawa's arm.

She gave herself over to him. She brought her head to his arm, placed the blanket over that, and curled up as if clinging to him.

For some reason, that action made her feel as if she understood why her parents and other relatives had fought.

Her new life would begin the following day.

That reminded her that her great-uncle had given her two things before leaving for the base.

They were contained within an envelope above her head. One was the paperwork needed to transfer to an Akigawa city school and the other…

…*A photograph of the North Star.*

She had been delighted to see he and Diana were safe and he had given a troubled look when she had hugged him.

She wondered if she would be troubling him more in the future like she would with Harakawa.

She also wondered if he too had been thinking about the dragon which had disappeared toward that star.

“—My first promise.”

She closed her eyes without knowing the answers, but her thoughts turned to the parents who had protected her, a number of other people, and even Black Sun.

…Thank you.

She breathed a sigh of relief, pressed against Harakawa, and fell asleep.

And as she did, she wondered if she could one day become like them.

"My first promise."

Afterword

And that was Owari no Chronicle 4-B.

Almost all of the major characters have been gathered now. I have determined I should say "sorry about the wait". (Who do I think I am?) As for how thick the book was and all that, it's thanks to all of you that I can do that. Thank you very much.

Also, it may be a little late for this, but I'm often asked where to start reading my City series. To be honest, you can really start anywhere. There is always release order or city order, but you can also go to the bookstore and open them up to the prologue and try reading one if you think it sounds good. The different cities all have their own idiosyncrasies, so you might find one you like even if you didn't like one of the others. Or you could decide based on Ya-san's illustrations. That might be another way to find a book to you can read.

Anyway, if you're interested, I hope you pick one of them up. Thank you very much.

Now for the usual chat.

“This is a pain, so just get straight to a stupid story from your high school days.”

“You aren’t even bothering asking about the book anymore? That’s admirable. …I was too busy to read it, anyway.”

“Wow, you’re just like those other horrible people! You monster wife!!”

“I’m just going to ignore that. Anyway, my school was a boy’s school and we didn’t have air conditioning at the time, so during the summer, it turned into a defenseless zone where about half of us took our classes in just our underwear. But then someone had a brilliant idea to keep us cool.”

“I’m sure I’d rather not know, but what was it?”

“We would take a certain rubber product meant for men, fill it up with water to about ten times the standard size, and hang about twenty of them from the ceiling. It was surprisingly cooling. The drips of condensation were awful, though.”

“Why didn’t the school stop you?”

“Anyway, we started a new game where we would flick mechanical pencil lead at them during class to make them spin. But one day, Nishida (pseudonym) actually broke through the side of one and it began to spin around while spraying water everywhere. That really sent a panic through the classroom.”

That’s what I call a new way of interrupting the class.

This time, I sympathized with Unicorn’s Sugar Boy as the background music.

“Who paved the path to happiness?”

I also thought on that. Okay, a lot is going to start moving next time.

November 2004. A morning of cold rain.

-Kawakami Minoru